1971

Wb Yeats' Early Poetry And Prose: The Landscape Of Art

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W. B. YEATS' EARLY POETRY AND PROSE:

THE LANDSCAPE OF ART

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Graduate Studies

The University of Western Ontario

London, Canada

July 1971

ABSTRACT

This study presents a revaluation of Yeats' poetry and prose of the 1880's and 1890's. Yeats' early work has usually been interpreted as largely imitative or derivative, and has generally been evaluated only in so far as it adumbrates the later poetic achievement. This study proposes that the young poet's critical environment gave him a heightened sense of his literary inheritance. His early writings are "literary" in a special sense: they frequently have aesthetic values as their subject and his sense of his literary inheritance as their theme.

Two important influences on the poet's early work were his father's condemnation of the undramatic "egoism" of much romantic expression and Matthew Arnold's critical definition of the malaise of contemporary romantic poetry, a poetry which was often merely an "allegory" of the poet's mind, unfortunately symptomatic of the age's declining imaginative power. From the beginning of his career Yeats was critical of his own tendencies towards a personal subjective art, and his early concern to be a poet of the "people" and not a poet of "coteries" prompted him to plan a program for his development. The verse plays and poems of the 1880's display his deliberate progress through "landscapes of art" from the pastoral "The Island of Statues" to the epic character attempted in "The Wanderings of Oisin."

Yeats' 1886 essay on the epic art of Sir Samuel Ferguson displays a fervent allegiance to an epic Irish poetry of the "dawn" and explicitly condemns the dwindling inspiration of contemporary "sunset" English poetry with its "sad soliloquies" of self-conscious subjectivism. His first long poem, "The Wanderings of Oisin," written largely in the following year, is an ambitious essay into the heroic mode. This poem is not a mere "flight into fairyland" as Yeats' later criticism disarmingly describes it. Rather, it is an imaginative flight into poetic tradition. It reviews epochs of imaginative life, defines the contemporary period (and the necessary antagonism between the different stages of English and Irish imaginative life), satirizes literary enemies, and announces an Irish literary renaissance.

Subsequent to the publication of this poem, Yeats came under the strong influence of Pater's aestheticism and the artistic discipline of the Rhymer poets. Admiring the aesthetic purity of poets such as Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson, Yeats, nevertheless, recognized them as poets of the "sunset" phase, practising an art deliberately indifferent to the "popular" art which he, as a poet of the Celtic dawn, had elected to serve. Yeats' attempt to reconcile the vigorous epic character of Celtic inspiration with the stylistic excellence of the Rhymer lyric inspiration is the recurring theme of the allegorical stories of The Secret Rose. From the vantage point of a re-interpretation of "The Wanderings of Oisin" the essentially epic range of Yeats' poetic ambitions can be seen more clearly. The passionate dawn of an epic sensibility announced in that poem developed in his mind into an

apocalyptic sense of the late European sunset phase of imaginative life hurrying towards extinction. The age was about to reverse itself; the time of violent renewal was imminent. It is in this context that the dramatic character of both a Celtic Twilight and the occultism of a Golden Dawn can be appreciated.

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INTRODUCTION

This study attempts a new approach to Yeats' poetry and prose of the 1880's and 1890's. The usual critical approach to this early work has neglected the contemporary meaning it had for Yeats, and, instead, has interpreted it as significant only as it adumbrates the themes of the later poetry. It has been the general practice to view the earlier work from the perspective of the later performance, and, by a process of retrospective logic, to explain its significance by treating it reductively: as a series of premises which validate what is considered to be the later achievement. We propose that an understanding of the contemporary relevance this early work had for the poet is a more reasonable and promising starting point for an evaluation of his growth than is the familiar approach which reads it either as a foreshadowing of a later achievement or as imitative, derivative, and simply apprenticeship work.

We intend to demonstrate that the critical environment of the young poet gave him a heightened sense of his literary inheritance and a strong sense of his historical position in relation to that tradition. We further propose to demonstrate that much of the poetry and prose of this period is only apparently imitative and derivative, for it is "literary" in a special sense. It can be read allegorically as verse which frequently has aesthetic values as its subject and Yeats' sense of his literary inheritance as its theme.

In Chapter One, Yeats' moral and aesthetic "landscape of art" is described. Chapter Two considers the verse and verse plays before "The Wanderings of Oisin" as landscapes of art through which the poet-figure, who is both explorative questor and protagonist, moves. The progress of the poet-figure is, we argue, conscious and deliberate, and ambitiously advances from the pastoral to the epic poem, "The Wanderings of Oisin." The immediate background for this first major poem is presented in the following chapter, and in Chapter Four a detailed examination of that poem's themes is made. The poem has long been read as a premature essay into Irish mythology by a poet whose Pre-Raphaelite manner is unfortunately insistent. We will propose that the poem is a young poet's "tour de force," an imaginative flight, not into "fairyland" but into poetic tradition, a poem which reviews epochs of poetry, defines symbolically the contemporary period, satirizes literary enemies, and announces an Irish literary renaissance. From the vantage point of this appreciation, we suggest in the concluding chapter a new interpretation of the whole spectrum of Yeats' work in the 1890's.

CHAPTER I

THE LANDSCAPE OF ART

> "We both of us need to substitute more and more
> the landscape of nature for the landscape of art."
> (Letter to Katherine Tynan. Dec. 21, 1888)[1]

The landscape of nature to which Yeats was referring was quite simply the landscape of the Irish countryside and the "landscape" of its idiom as distinct from the derivative, sentimentalized, and literary landscape of "Wordsworthianism." Addressed as it was to the particular talent of Tynan, it has little reference to the landscape of symbolic expression presenting occult "nature" that was soon to become so predominant in Yeats' poetry. Yeats tactfully includes himself in the criticism to a friend and co-writer in a new literary movement, but this criticism of borrowed style and imported inspiration had for years beforehand been a subject of his concern and a subject of much of his earliest writing. The subject of this chapter is the landscape of art as it is presented in the verse of Yeats published before "Oisin," a landscape which, I will argue, was not simply a composite of an apprentice's literary borrowing "in imitation of Spenser and Shelley" but rather a sophisticated and critical evaluation of his literary inheritance. An understanding of the critical environment in which the young poet wrote is essential for an appreciation not only of the

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[1]The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 99.

allegorical meaning of much early verse, but also for its significance in the evolution of Yeats' later themes and his consequent style.

Comment on the verse written by the young poet before the publication of "Oisin" has usually been limited to brief and generalized analysis. There are several reasons for this. The poetry itself, compared to later and more mature work, has been considered, quite appropriately, as lacking in great literary merit, and is usually appreciated only in so far as it introduces themes which would later find more substantial and interesting expression in subsequent poetry. The relegation of this early verse to the category of "imitation" or simple apprenticeship has, of course, been encouraged by Yeats' treatment of this early period in his Autobiographies, which despite its tone of candid appraisal, is selective, shaped and interpretative. The Autobiographies presents what memory provides, and interprets what is "significant"; that is, that which a later Yeats considers to have been formative towards the conclusions he subsequently made. As a work of art, the Autobiographies has its own rationale of meaning, its own myth, which the earlier poet, it can be assumed, did not share consciously, and perhaps would have disputed. Several recent studies of the Autobiographies have pointed out how its interpretations differ from other evidence now available to critics.[2]

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[2]Two such studies are Ian Fletcher's "Rhythm and Pattern in Autobiographies" in An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W. B. Yeats, ed. Denis Donaghue and J. R. Mulryne (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1965) and Joseph Ronsley's Yeats's Autobiographies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). Fletcher observes that the composition of the first section of Autobiographies in 1914 was influenced by the "painful and frustrating" experiences of the Playboy riots, Synge's death, and the controversy over the Lane pictures. Yeats wrote his first section "in their shadow" (p. 166). One can assume, in such circumstances, that the character of "Oisin" might be disguised.

Standard biographies of Yeats written by Henn, Jeffares, and Hone, when commenting on the poetry of the 1880's, treat those formative years largely under the directive of the shaping spirit of the Autobiographies. Occasionally where the dismissing manner of the Autobiographies seems too abrupt, or even misleading, a biographer will point up a discrepancy or suggest the probable truth. For example, Ellmann will comment upon Yeats' sweeping hyperbole, that the settings for two of his early verse plays were outlandish: one centered in the Caucasus, the other in a crater of the moon ("and I knew myself to be confused") mildly correcting the exaggeration in pointing out that one setting referred to was Spain, not the moon. But settings in Spain at the time of the Inquisition, or in a timeless Arcadia, and the themes and preoccupations of the early verse plays are usually dismissed as insignificant. Ellmann, whose books provide material (and poems) never elsewhere published, concludes that the young Yeats is groping towards a command of his symbolism and sometimes appears to be "halfway to allegory."[3] This assessment suggests a primitive stage in early development, "halfway to allegory" being a misdirected advance by the young poet, or a relapse into a lesser poetic mode. Other characteristic assessments by early critics follow the guide lines offered by the Autobiographies, sometimes incorporating quotations from that work as authority for a light and rapid assessment of the poet's first seven years of writing. Menon's treatment of the early verse plays is characteristic of this approach.

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[3]Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co. Inc.), no date, p. 32.

> The dramatic sketches are short inconsequential works. They are the work of an indolent young man, somewhat lost in the world of everyday life. "The Island of Statues" is the earliest of them, an Arcadian pastoral with enchanted islands, mysterious flowers, and timid shepherds. 'I had read Shelley and Spenser and tried to mix their styles together in a pastoral play.' The pastoral setting, the Arcadian shepherds, Naschina's disguise in the quest of her lover, are all in the Spenserian manner. Spenser's Island of Venus and Diana's nymphs changing into stone obviously suggested the play to him. On the other hand, the voices and their prophecies and the general atmosphere of doom about the Island are echoes of Prometheus Unbound which was his sacred book at that time. I don't think the play is to be seriously treated as an allegory. Technically, it is uncertain....[4]

Some recent criticism has moved more purposively into this early period, pursuing the origins of particular themes or images which have, in the later verse, achieved distinction. Such criticism analyzes the verse closely but the analysis is usually limited to a search for the substantiation of an argument. One need not argue for the high literary merit of this verse to suggest that it should not be considered merely as a repository of half-understood themes which were later to find ample, confident expression. Typically such criticism adopts a conclusion (whether philosophic or aesthetic) of the later Yeats and reads all poetry and criticism prior to this particular conclusion as "moving towards" it. Typically again, the conclusion which initiates the search for a line of development is regarded as having a kind of a priori necessity which the analysis of development will subsequently illustrate as "logical." A common organizational method of such criticism is to see the conclusion as a fusion of opposites, or as an

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[4]V. K. Narayana Menon, The Development of William Butler Yeats (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1942), p. 7.

alignment of stark opposition, and then to search back into the earlier work for the "strands" of antithesis which could later be resolved or consciously polarized. Such retrospective logic, where conclusions seek a logical ancestry of premises, can be misleading as a description of the evolution of Yeats' themes or of his style and quite unappreciative of the actual character of his verse published during the 1880's.

The conclusion with which Engelberg begins, in his study of the evolution of Yeats' aesthetics, is the achievement of the poet's characteristic poetic mode, the dramatic lyric. The dramatic lyric, as the term implies, is a fusion of seemingly opposite aesthetic ideals: the lyric voice of personal expression and the dramatic "emotion of Multitude." The combination of the two provides that universal particular ideal of symbolic verse. Engelberg analyzes Yeats' critical writings to argue that a pattern of evolution is evident (that is, what was prior in time was also logically preliminary); he does not intend "to test the validity of the aesthetic against the performance of the poetry," and he continues, "Nor do I pretend to approach my subject primarily from the viewpoint of literary history, to trace Yeats' thoughts to 'influences', or to attach him, in specific ways, to particular poets and traditions."[5] Engelberg's book is quite rich in its descriptions of probable "sources" but his method of free juxtapositioning of parallel ideas, or ideas in opposition (to give a density to the pattern he elaborates as representatives of Yeats'

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[5]Edward Engelberg, The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats's Aesthetic (University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. xxvi.

mind), results in a systematization which is probably more logical than Yeats' apprehension of it was.

Another critic, Allen R. Grossman, finds his centre of interest not in the poetry of the late or middle period (so popular to most critics who then necessarily view the earliest poetry as beyond the pale of worthwhile criticism) but in The Wind Among the Reeds published just one decade after The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems. The proximity of The Wind Among the Reeds to the earliest verse gives a greater weight of potential significance to it, but Grossman's theme of tracing "the drama of poetic knowledge" as "Yeats' first major myth" introduces a myth which is more a composite of Boehme and Freud than it is representative of Yeats' sensibility. His treatment of the Muse figure with which my study is in part concerned is psychological and mythical.[6]

Another critic, Whitaker, discusses the early poetry in his general assessment of Yeats' "dialogue with history." Again, the procedure is similar to that of Engelberg and Grossman: the performance of Yeats' "mature" poetry is considered as a successful union of two antithetical themes or points of view to be seen in early poems alternately as the poetry of "vision" and the poetry of "self-portraiture." Whitaker's interesting analysis stays largely within the terminology of Yeats' own theorizing, but in pushing back his analysis into the poetry of the 1880's, he pursues a retrospective logic which gives a character to poetry that is quite "unhistorical" as a

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[6]Allen Grossman, Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats: A Study of "The Wind Among the Reeds" (University of Virginia Press, 1969).

description of Yeats' sensibility at that time. For example, his interpretation of the images of reflecting surfaces so prevalent in this poetry (and which we will discuss later at some length) speaks from a point of view well beyond Yeats' understanding, intuition, or even his probable interests at this early period of his career. In a premature hammering of Yeats' thoughts into unity, Whitaker comments on the mirror and reflecting water imagery: "As the image glitters or glooms, it reflects Yeats's continual movement between man's condition as a creator, imitating the primal art of God in a mirroring universe, and his condition as a finite sufferer, enduring and transcending the serpentine cycles of history."[7] Two other studies which treat the early verse more directly, without the urgency to find a "pattern" corroborative of a later wisdom, can be mentioned now. G. M. Harper's Yeats's Quest for Eden and H. Orel's The Development of William Butler Yeats 1885-1900 attempt a sympathetic appraisal of the contemporary relevance which Yeats' early work had for him. Harper's study really corroborates Yeats' easy dismissal in his Autobiographies of the Arcadian verse plays. "To a young poet tending towards aestheticism, the pastoral was an obvious choice for escape from the sordidness of a social order..."[8] and "...the pastoral may well have seemed one of the last traditional modes available to the Romantic poet who conceived contemporary life as a badly mangled copy of a lost ideal."[9] He refers

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[7]Thomas Whitaker, Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History (Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 7.

[8]George Mills Harper, Yeats's Quest For Eden (Dublin: Dolmen Press, IX, 1965), p. 291.

[9]Harper, p. 297.

to "The Island of Statues" as "little more than escapism"[10] and is mystified but incurious about "The Seeker." "If the poem has allegorical significance, it certainly does not readily fit into the conventional pastoral purpose."[11] Harper's concentration upon the pastoral passes over the imagery of reflection and echo which we will subsequently study. He sees it as little but the standard imagery of pastoral verse. "The Wanderings of Oisin" is interpreted as "The high point of early escape poetry." It becomes evident that Harper's study of the early verse is made to heighten a contrast with the pastoral of "radical innocence" of a later Yeats.

Orel's book is not limited to the identification of the pastoral as the prevailing mode of the verse plays, and he does not review the work with a dismissal in mind. He defines his approach:

> ...the years between 1885 and 1899 should be looked at through Yeats's eyes. The letters, essays, polemical contributions, and hack-work writing during those years gives us a much fresher and truer understanding of what Yeats thought he was doing, of what he conceived his strategy of maturation to be, than any later autobiographical writings, many of which often distort and often 'recreate' the conditions of Yeats's formative period.[12]

However, while not attempting to enforce a pattern on the verse and while obviously trying to accept these pieces on their own merits, he finds them interesting or significant only in so far as they adumbrate later themes or preoccupations of Yeats. "Mosada," "The Seeker,"

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[10]Harper, p. 300.

[11]Harper, p. 301.

[12]Harold Orel, The Development of William Butler Yeats: 1885-1900 (University of Kansas Publications, 1968), p. 2.

"Time and the Witch Vivien" are "confrontations towards which all dreamers move,"[13] confrontations which are more forcefully experienced and more clearly understood in later verse. The plays, he feels, are largely "exercises" and are significant only in so far as they "prefigure later explorations of the possibility that the soul has dual allegiance."[14]

Such is the character of the criticism treating the verse which is the subject of this chapter. This study proposes to show that this verse reflects Yeats' preoccupation with defining his poetic role in relation to his literary inheritance. Rather than viewing this poetry as exercises and imitations whose only interest is their occasional prefiguring of later themes, we will attempt an appreciation of their contemporary relevance. The early verses are derivative in a special and interesting sense: they are often poems about poetry, poems which have as their theme the relation of art to life, of the imaginative life to the mundane world. There are verses which suggest undeniably a conscious handling of aesthetic themes which should be appreciated as allegory and not as a groping towards symbolic statement.

In the early verse there are numerous images of reflection--mirrors, water, echoes. They can be readily recognized as primitive expressions of Yeats' sense of a divided self and also as the first formulation of Yeats' poetic world of opposition of the self and anti-self, and of the theory of the Mask. But, we must ask, is their

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[13]Orel, p. 8.

[14]Orel, p. 10.

significance only potential? Are such images simply the somewhat vague and inarticulate expression of experimental verse? A popular alternative interpretation (encouraged as we have said by Yeats' references in the Autobiographies) is that the prevalence of this kind of imagery simply "reflects" the heavy and uncritical borrowing from Spenser and Shelley. Two approaches which so readily dismiss most of the verse of a very prolific four years (from 1884 to 1887) may reasonably be suspected as inadequate. They are, we propose to show, also very misleading.

On internal evidence alone, the verse of this period exhibits a critical perspective which evaluates the romantic tradition of the poet's inheritance. The prevalence of images of reflection suggest a heightened self-consciousness which goes beyond the uncertainty and self-questioning natural to a poet of Yeats' temperament who is beginning to write. In addition to the reflecting mirrors, pools, shields, and the "voices" and echoes of self-questioning there are the related images which present the attractiveness of subjective withdrawal in the dewdrops "listening to the sound of their own dropping," and in the flowers of narcotic reverie. But these are countered by images of self-assertion: the parrot "raging" at his image in the enamelled sea of composure and self-sufficiency, the lonely splendour of the stars. All these images which express personal uncertainty also express a dissatisfaction with a literary tradition which encourages subjectivism. We will later in our analysis of this poetry discuss the allegorical significance of the "plots" of the verse dramas where poet figures move critically through the "landscape of art" which is recognized as inadequate for the desired expression of the young poet.

Before beginning this analysis we must consider what conditions in Yeats' aesthetic environment would have produced a critical attitude towards poetic modes and themes to which he was temperamentally attracted. The father's influence as a forceful, intelligent, and articulate theorist upon aesthetic values will be assessed and related to the opposition of images and the lines of tension in the "plots" of these supposed imitations of Spenser and Shelley. We will consider also other sources for Yeats' critical attitude towards an inbred "subjective" literature. The general opposition between the public values of popular Victorian literature and the ideals of the "pure" art of early aestheticism must also be defined, for this opposition prompted a rhetorical defense of aesthetic values and encouraged the employment of allegory and sometimes pointed satire. Finally, we must consider the influence of the literary inspiration of so much Pre-Raphaelite poetry on Yeats' allegorical tendency in his early verse.

The influence of J. B. Yeats as his son's artistic mentor was dominant in the 1880's. His brilliance, his emphatic discourse would naturally be somewhat overwhelming, and, understandably, occasionally oppressive. But, if oppressive sometimes, it was not repressive nor unsympathetic to the different temperament of the young poet. Ellmann, in Yeats: The Man and the Masks seems to give undue emphasis to a smouldering unconscious antagonism to which was added the conscious dilemma of a son who in attempting to revolt against a father's radically liberal views was forced into a curious conservativism as the expression of his rebellion. Other critics pursuing a more narrow and disciplined Freudian line have sought in the theme of antagonism to the

father an explication of the "private" symbolism of "The Wanderings of Oisin."[15]

The disagreements which are remembered in the Autobiographies and two occasions of physical violence (noted by Hone from Yeats' unpublished memoirs) would seem to be nothing out of the ordinary and of little consequence in comparison to the overall tone and character of their relationship during Yeats' teens. Disagreement was not the prevailing note. There was an obvious alliance between the two as "artists" in a world of largely hostile or indifferent Philistine values, and the father was the theorist and an admirable spokesman for the artist's world of aesthetic values. The many changes of domicile brought about by J. B. Yeats' pursuit of a career in painting probably formed the son's distaste for wandering "cosmopolitanism" and increased his desire for an art "rooted" in a living tradition. But such moves also brought into sharp opposition the young poet's sense of the necessary alliance of artists in the face of a world with alien values. The family dislocations and moves into strange environments, often of unsettling contrast (such as the change from Sligo to London), increased the boy's sense of being "different" but also encouraged the compensatory pride in being "an artist's son." The father's rootlessness was itself caused by the modern conditions which made the artist's life one of disruption and loneliness. In the face of these conditions, father and son shared a common artistic cause.

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[15]Morton Irving Seiden, "A Psychoanalytic Essay on William Butler Yeats" (Accent, 1946), pp. 178-190.

Apart from this sense of alliance there was an additional reason why the father's dominance was not repressive. The older Yeats' fondness for strong antithetical statement was attractive to the son, who lacking experience, would understandably adopt opinion and theory, expressed so confidently, so aggressively. The style of the father's exaggerated contrasts, which could and did provoke disagreement, invited a response of counter statement. Education from such a parent was challenging, and while undoubtedly somewhat oppressive in its dogmatic manner was not repressive. The general effect on the son whose character was naturally sensitive and retiring was to make him highly critical and heavily opinionated. When the boy began to write poetry at the age of seventeen, a formidable amount of his subject matter was not dream or reverie but aesthetic convictions and firm opinions on values in literature. "At seventeen years old, I was already an old-fashioned brass cannon full of shot, and nothing had kept me from going off but a doubt as to my capacity to shoot straight."[16]

It is important to recognize that the poet's "break" from his father's dominating influence, which in the Autobiographies Yeats says coincided with his beginning a concentrated study of "psychical research and mystical philosophy,"[17] was a break from dominance, not a termination of influence, and certainly not a rejection of his father's aesthetic views. What was probably a gradual process, Yeats in the Autobiographies characteristically describes dramatically as a sudden emergence. The

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[16]W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London: MacMillan, 1956), p. 116. The Autobiographies is hereafter abbreviated as Auto.

[17]Auto., p. 89.

process probably began in 1884 when the young man was first introduced to Sinnett's works on occultism and progressed as he became involved with the Hermetical Society in Dublin 1885, the Theosophical Society in London, 1887 and later the Order of the Golden Dawn in Dublin 1890. The influence of the occult, which bothered O'Leary as much as it did J. B. Yeats, had little effect upon Yeats' aesthetic presuppositions: in fact such studies were interpreted by him as an elaboration of and a substantiation for aesthetic ideals. He was searching for an "authority," for the mysterious roots of wisdom which his poet's instincts felt but did not understand. If we review the references in the Autobiographies to the disagreements with his father, we can see that the young poet's criticism was directed not towards J. B. Yeats' aesthetic values but rather at the lack of a discipline and a tradition for those values. There is a rejection of the urbane rationalism and easy scepticism of the older Yeats which offended the young man's need for what he termed a "religion" of literature, and which offered no philosophic defense, no authority beyond "taste" for its cherished aesthetic values. The poet, "being in all things Pre-Raphaelite" and longing for "patterns, for Pre-Raphaelitism, and for an art allied to poetry,"[18] was critical of his father's changed allegiance to Impressionistic painting, a change which left out of painting the "subject" or "story," all the environment of romance and tradition, and substituted for it a new preoccupation with method which seemed "a misunderstanding created by Victorian science."[19]

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[18] Auto., p. 81.

[19] Auto, p. 82.

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[18] Auto., p. 81.

[19] Auto, p. 82.

It was a "misunderstanding", the young poet thought, and not an alien vision of art, for his father remained in his literary appreciation "always a pre-Raphaelite" and continued to share his son's hatred of the "Victorian poetry of ideas."[20] He was a victim, for all his urbanity of manner, of a rootlessness which expressed itself in a preoccupation with form and experiments in various styles, with the result that his paintings were always evolving, often left uncompleted, and seldom finished to his satisfaction. The memory of one painting reworked throughout a year and reflecting the changing seasons remained for W. B. Yeats an image of passive hopelessness, a mirror of the soul of modern man.[21]

The "Grey Truth" of abstract thought, which his father equally condemned as alien to the human truth expressed in true art, vitiated his own inspiration. In his memoirs, J. B. Yeats later defines a problem which must have been obvious to his son at the time. On his neglect to accept an invitation to visit Rossetti (who for both Yeats figured as the pure artist) the father reflected: "How often I regret that I did not go to him. Perhaps at a simple bound I should have escaped forever from this entangling grey web in which I have spent my life."[22] A fanciful hope characteristically expressed in absolute terms.

There are several sources for information on J. B. Yeats' aesthetic opinions. There is his son's Autobiographies where the general sharing

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[20] Auto., p. 66.

[21] Auto., p. 436.

[22] J. B. Yeats, Early Memories: Some Chapters of Autobiography (Churchtown, Dundrum, The Cuala Press, 1923), p. 28.

of views between father and son is somewhat overshadowed by the highlighting of divergences, a highlighting dramatically desirable for the Autobiographies and necessary for the process of self-definition. There is J. B. Yeats' Early Memories: Some Chapters of Autobiography. There are his letters, and there are references and reminiscences of early acquaintances. One finds very little development or change in his aesthetic values and in his evaluations of poets. Like his son, his matured wisdom seems to be simply the recognition of what thoughts were essential to his character and belonged to him by natural affinity. We find, for example, his assessment of the relative merits of Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, expressed in letters to Dowden in the 1870's, substantially the same as his later view expressed in letters to his son in 1915 and 1916. Amid the many changing interests and speculations of this gregarious man, his literary values seemed to have changed very little.

In the Autobiographies, W. B. Yeats describes his father's preference for the dramatic over the lyric: "...he read passages from the poets, and always the play or poem at its most passionate moment.... he did not even care for a lyric passage unless he felt some actual man behind its elaboration of beauty....He thought Keats a greater poet than Shelley, because less abstract..."[23] Dramatic expression was extolled because through it the total man achieved his "personality," a unity of being which was comprehensive in its psychological completeness. Such dramatic expression modified "ideas" which would otherwise be "entangling gray theory" into a condition of the total being of the personality.

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[23]Auto, p. 65.

In his Early Memories, J. B. Yeats presents this ideal poetic state, once again referring to Rossetti as a functional antithesis: "A personality is a man brought into unity by a mood, not a static unity (that is Character) but alive and glowing like a star....Had I met Rossetti in the flesh, I think I should have cast out forever the questioning intellect...and lived the imaginative life."[24]

That momentary unity, "glowing like a star," is the unity of Keats' Porphyro, not the eloquent aspiration of a Shelley. Writing of Swinburne and Shelley, "My criticism is that both these poets are lacking in the entire sincerity of the greatest poets, that because Keats has the greater sincerity he is greater than either. I find indeed in Shelley and Swinburne, animation, eloquence. I find in Keats force as mother nature."[25]

The "only doctrine for poets" was Keats' "conscious ignorance" with respect to abstract ideas (his description of Keats' negative capability). Pure poetry avoided speculation or didactic intent. Once again Keats and Shelley are contrasted: "'Cut out the magnanimity', said Keats to Shelley....By magnanimity he meant the new philosophy of the abstract which even Shelley could not make poetically iridescent."[26] Shelley, in J. B. Yeats' estimation, too often betrayed his poetry for philosophy. He was never guilty of the moralizing of Wordsworth ("Wordsworth to my mind was a sort of servile poet enforcing always willpower"[27]) but his

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[24]J. B. Yeats, Early Memories, p. 29.

[25]Ibid., p. 91.

[26]J. B. Yeats, J. B. Yeats: Letters to His Son W. B. Yeats and Others (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 204.

[27]Ibid., p. 124.

poetic self was betrayed repeatedly by ideas "which came to him second hand from the cold brain of Godwin."[28]

> Let poetry by all means touch on ideas, but let it only be a 'touching' and a tentative groping with the sensitive poetical fingers. It is a bad poetry which proclaims a definite belief--because it is a sin against sincerity. Wordsworth was full of 'beliefs' and ideas yet it is always evident that he knew them to be only longings--and so with every poet of ideas.[29]

In all these presented opinions, it should be noted that there is a singular emphasis on style. The subject of a poem, its philosophy, its comprehensiveness as a statement of human experience, is nowhere considered. W. B. Yeats recalls in his Autobiographies: "He disliked the Victorian poetry of ideas, and Wordsworth but for certain passages or whole poems....He no longer read me anything for its story, and all our discussion was of style."[30]

For the father, a successful "style" was, in negative terms, an avoidance of "ideas" or of didactic intent; in positive terms, it was the expression of moments of psychological truth. Dramatic poetry was the integrity of Keats transported "by rage or passion" into a mood which added intensity to harmony. The young poet shared his father's prejudices against Wordsworth. They were always in alliance against the Victorian "poetry of ideas." Where they differed in their appreciation of Keats and Shelley was in their different appreciation of the "subject matter" or "story" of poetry. For the father's aesthetic world of

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[28] Ibid., p. 204.

[29] Ibid., p. 221.

[30] Auto., p. 66.

psychological completeness was an expression of the autonomous world of pure poetry, a defense of its ideal integrity, aggressively asserted and championed as an expression of "personality," but still a defensive conception protected from the "entangling grey theory" which always threatened "the imaginative life."

The son's adulation of Shelley reflected his hopes for the greater subject matter of poetry and for its world-transforming possibilities. The young Yeats, impressed by the father's assertion of the "personality" of pure poetry, adopted its inspiration and extended its application. He was to confront his father with a definition of "truth" as "dramatic utterance" and to propose that one could build up a system of "truth" based upon the inspired utterance of great poets: "...Whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to authoritative religion....truth as the dramatically appropriate utterance of the highest man."[31] The concept of truth as an embodiment, as a state of the sensibility, derives from his father's convictions on style, but the "imaginative life" which the father conceived of as an autonomous world is extended by the young poet into a description of reality. The proposed definition of truth annoyed J. B. Yeats, and understandably, for it naively ignored boundaries of the mind which the father's education had concluded as unfortunately "reasonable," and reintroduced the term "truth" into poetry's "style" which the sceptical mind of J. B. Yeats, the reasonable disciple of Mill, must reject. The son's unorthodox education recognized no such boundaries and was ready to extend the father's psychologically understood world of "imagination"

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[31] Auto., p. 90.

into an epistomology ("whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to authoritative religion"), and soon into a metaphysic where psychological states or "moods," as he came to call them, would be understood as dramatizations of objectively real spiritual beings.

Subjective "truth" had such a world-transforming potential, but the young poet's experience of that potential was limited to the instincts of a brooding reverie and to the ardent but theoretical idealism of Shelley's Defense of Poetry. The idea of Anima Mundi was in the 1880's still theoretical speculation derived from literary sources ("whatever the great poets had affirmed...") and was not yet a personal experience which could be investigated empirically. The subjective life of the young poet was naturally rich; the attractiveness of his own revery made his attention wander from the discipline of formal schooling. In his verse, this natural introspectiveness found a pleasant literary identification:

> ...I soon chose Alastor for my chief
> of men and longed to share his melancholy,
> and maybe at last to disappear from
> everybody's sight as he disappeared
> drifting in a boat along some slow moving
> river between great trees.[32]

The figure of Alastor was doubtlessly flattering for a dreamy youth and gave a glamour to the natural timidity and evasiveness of his temperament. In the first section of the Autobiographies, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," Yeats gives deliberate emphasis to such Shelleyan influence and presents it as the dominant literary inspiration for his

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[32] Auto., p. 64.

early verse including "Oisin." Thus, "Oisin," a poem which was planned as a major work announcing the young poet's entrance into a new movement of Irish literature, is presented as a work which concludes a period of literary apprenticeship, of borrowed, literary inspiration. The poem is summarily dismissed for its affectations of style: "...dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately reshaped my style..."[33] The implication is that "Oisin" too was dominated by the Alastor inspiration. This is a simplification which is misleading, which serves the argument of the Autobiographies more than it evaluates the real character of that poem and its contemporary significance to its author.

The Alastor inspiration we can well conclude came under criticism from his father much earlier than 1887, the year in which "Oisin" was written. It offended at least two of J. B. Yeats' aesthetic principles: "sincerity" and "intensity." The father valued the dramatic, and was alternately annoyed and intrigued with that trait in his son, his brooding introspection. For J. B. Yeats, subjectivity in art was synonymous with "egoism," an expression of unfortunate individualism which was opposite to the ideal of "personality" in art. It is well to remember that J. B. Yeats exercised considerable direction over his son's education, dictating the subjects in the curriculum of the Dublin High School which were to be ignored (geography and history were not to be studied, they could be learned from "general reading"). He had challenged the themes proposed for essays as training youth to be "insincere and

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[33]Auto., p. 74.

false to themselves" and had even directed his son to write on opposite themes in open rebuttal. After leaving school in 1884, the son enrolled at the Metropolitan Art School in Dublin where his father was his art instructor. During the years there, W. B. Yeats describes his father's influence over him as "at its height."[34] The young man's drawings and paintings "for the most part exaggerated all that my father did"[35] and his first essays in verse included a proposed "long play on a fable suggested by one of my father's early designs."[36]

It would seem reasonable to conclude that the youth's tendency towards brooding introspection would have been countered by his father's criticism and that the verse of the 1880's would evidence a critical attitude and dissatisfaction towards the romantic inheritance of subjectivism in poetry long before its supposed realization after the writing of "Oisin" as the Autobiographies propose. We can in fact observe in the verse attempts to exorcize the beguiling attraction of the Alastor role, and we can reasonably read The Island of Statues as a parable of literary criticism. From sources other than the Autobiographies (from letters and essays, and from the reminiscences of acquaintances of the younger poet later to be discussed) we gain a clearer perspective on the deliberateness of Yeats' program for his poetry, a perspective which the Autobiographies foreshorten and obscure. We know, for example, that while at the high school Yeats had read Arnold with appreciation, not only his essay on the Celtic element in literature but also the 1853 Preface

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[34]Auto., p. 64.

[35]Auto., p. 79.

[36]Auto., p. 74.

which analyzed the romantic malaise of a poetry which was but "allegory" of the poet's mind. We find Arnold's criticism echoed in Yeats' article in 1886 on the poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson where that poet is esteemed because he escaped the narrowing subjectivism of contemporary poetry. Ferguson is presented as the one Homeric poet of the age, a poet whose "...descriptions are not a mask behind which go the sad soliloquies of the nineteenth century."[37] The early desire for "pattern," for a poetry enriched by association with the other arts, and later for a poetry "of the people," made Yeats critical of "egoism" in art, of the barren shallowness of art which was "subjective, an inner way of looking at things assumed by a single mind," all the "literature of a point of view." A letter written late in his life reviews this abiding theme: "All my life I have tried to get rid of modern subjectivity by insisting upon construction and contemporary words and syntax. It was to free myself to do this that I used to insist that all my poems should be spoken (hence my plays) or sung."[38] Yeats in 1884 had written "play after play--for my father exalted dramatic poetry above all other kinds." His interest in spoken verse as a corrective to "modern subjectivity" evidently goes back at least to this year. On leaving the high school in the Spring of that year he confided to a schoolmaster, a Mr. McNeil, his program for poetry. Mr. McNeil recalls the youth's plans: "My clearest recollection of him is a long talk we had in the College Park shortly after he left school. He confided to me all his plans for the

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[37]W. B. Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson" (Dublin University Review, Nov. 1886).

[38]Letter to Edmund Dulac, July 15, 1937, Wade, p. 892.

future as to writing and reciting poetry..."[39]

We can expect that the earliest verse and plays would at the very least exhibit symptoms of the conflict between the young poet's natural inclination to drift like Alastor into a world of subjective revery and his critical attitude towards such a tendency. We might well expect that his poetry might have aesthetics as its subject and the young poet's literary inheritance as its theme. The Arcadian settings and the themes of the quests may be considered in a special sense as sophisticated "pastorals" presenting landscapes of art and plots which are histories of literary progress. We can remember that the young Yeats was a critic before he was a poet, and while he condemned the popular "poetry of ideas" which expressed scientific opinion, psychological curiosity, or moral abstractions, he was himself an old brass cannon loaded with aesthetic convictions, and he had a strong sense of the artistic tradition expressed in Pre-Raphaelitism. There is one aspect of this tradition which we must briefly consider; that is, its tendency in poetry and art towards what may be called the allegorical expression of a literary and artistic world. Poems about poetry, about art, and pictures on literary subjects were common. The subject matter was often art itself.

Pre-Raphaelitism, considered as a re-birth of Romanticism in protest against current popular values in art and literature, was marked by a strong sense of historical self-consciousness. In literature its mediaevalism was an aesthetic statement, an "historical" evaluation of

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[39]M. A. Christy, "Yeats's Teacher" (Times Literary Supplement, May 20, 1965), p. 397.

contemporary dissatisfaction with popular poetry, not an historical appreciation of the past. Its tradition was literary, often specifically Keatsian. The mediaeval distancing was the measure of its protest, or indifference, towards scientism and the Victorian poetry of ideas. Ruskin and Morris shared the moral fervour of their age but directed their criticism towards a contemporary taste. Rossetti, more the pure artist in J. B. Yeats' eyes, asserted the autonomy of art which expressed the human truth and which was supremely unconcerned with whether or not the sun went around the earth or the earth went around the sun. The younger Yeats would quote Rossetti's remark and employ it as a defiant statement flung in the face of literary critics who, like Edward Dowden, saw "progress" in literature just in so far as it accommodated itself to the march of scientific progress and assimilated its "facts." Rossetti was for both of the Yeats's the pure artist whose art was supposedly free from "entangling grey theory" or the "questioning intellect," a convenient figure to hold up in contrast to prevalent contemporary literature of very mixed and questionable inspiration. A convenient antithesis for the father, he was for the son, who was a systems-maker and was far from being indifferent to the relations of art and science, a kind of inspiration. But the young Yeats, who sought autonomy in art from the pressing opinion of the age, did not want such autonomy to become isolation. Metaphorically, as a systems-maker, he was a Ptolemaist who would relate the human truth of personality to theories of race, of Anima Mundi, to a pattern of history. In his youth he could only express this dimly sensed potential as a desire for "pattern," and the coherence which such pattern offered did not at first go beyond the world of art.

He had yet to explore the "deeper Pre-Raphaelitism."

The subject matter of pure art which avoided a direct relevance to popular subjects of concern, and which had not yet advanced (or declined) into a late aesthetic position of self-sufficient symbolism, was poetry itself and the imaginative process. Its tradition was literary and derivative. The young Yeats who desired "subject" and "story" for art, and who felt a Shelleyan-inspired belief in the greater, comprehending truth of the poetic imagination, saw "life" with literary eyes and history as a pageant, or procession, or as "phantasmagoria" by which the soul of the world displayed itself: "Thus at any rate do I, with my perhaps too literary eyes, read history, and turn all into a kind of theatre, where the proud walk in cloth of gold, and display their passionate hearts, that the groundlings may feel their souls wax the greater..."[40] This expresses a persistent interpretation of the relation of art to life and an implied rejection of an aestheticism where an autonomous art cuts itself off from communal intercourse with life. It is a very romantic and "literary" appreciation and evidences perhaps what Yeats meant by a "deeper Pre-Raphaelitism." In 1885, when Yeats met O'Leary, he deliberately sought to enlarge his too-literary inspiration by denouncing a poetry of the coteries and by planning to write a literature "of the people," employing a mythology rooted in rock and hill to the actual, not the literary, landscape of Ireland. But before he found such an opportunity to express hitherto theoretical beliefs of Shelleyan idealism in the durable reality of actual geography

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[40]Letter to The Bookman (Nov. 1892), Wade, p. 219.

or in the "soft wax" of Irish historical possibility, he was a poet whose inspirations and themes were literary.

The criticism of an art of coteries was a condemnation of art which sacrificed its traditional role of prophecy or celebration of life for autonomy. Its artistic purity was gained at the expense of life. In retreat from the pressing clamour demanding contemporary relevance, it withdrew from traditional roles which Shelley's Defense had so ardently persuaded were its birthright. Yeats, who sought to extend the boundaries of his art in 1885, did not forsake the aesthetic principles of his education (such as his father's emphasis upon "sincerity" and "intensity"). He pushed them into confrontation with figures of alien inspiration like Patrick, and sought in the "dramatic utterance" of confrontation a fuller poetic expression. There was a circle of artistic integrity, of aesthetic truth, which sought a larger area for expression than the coteries desired.

Yeats considers the poetry of "coteries" again in a later essay of 1901 "What is 'Popular Poetry'?" By this time he interprets such poetry as capable of being the true expression of an ancient poetry of the people, its symbolic manner evidence of its ancestry and its character of insularity the result of its being surrounded by a sea of contemporary "popular" newspaper culture. In this essay one can sense the later definitions of an art of aristocrat and peasant, sky and market place, the "high" thoughts spoken in the language of the people.

We suggest that the experience of the ambiguity of coterie art was evident to Yeats from his first experience of living in Bedford Park. The Bedford Park of Yeats' first memories was an artists' colony, "the

pre-Raphaelite movement at last affecting life."[41] In the Autobiographies it is remembered with some nostalgia as a period and state of Edenic freshness (so unlike many of Yeats' memories of unhappiness in childhood). It was an island of aesthetic truth, one to be explored, bounded by the unending sea of Philistinism of modern London, but not oppressed by it. It was a memory which prompted many later dreams of a Commonwealth of art, not escapist islands of retreat but cities with a social unity of being like Urbino, or a city of the artistic imagination like Byzantium. A memory of a breakfast conversation with his father at Bedford Park is revealing:

> ...he described the village Norman Shaw was building. I had thought he said, 'There is to be a wall around and no newspapers to be allowed in.' And when I told him how put out I was at finding neither wall nor gate, he explained that he had merely described what ought to be.[42]

The wall is an image of some importance in understanding Yeats' sensibility. Here an Edenic garden of art is suggested, which to a child is landscape enough for his exploration. The garden offers those conditions which Yeats elsewhere describes as his first idea of what a long poem should be: a thicket at Howth surrounded by three roads, "...a region where one should wander from the cares of life. The characters were to be no more real than the shadows that people the Howth thicket. Their mission was to lessen the solitude without destroying its peace."[43] There is a wall, too, around the Pre-Raphaelite

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[41] Auto., p. 113.

[42] Auto., p. 43.

[43] Quoted by Ellmann in Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 28.

Bedford Park of Yeats' first memory. It is the wall of coherence in an artist's colony where art reflected art, weaving a pattern of inter-relation which gave a sense of the imagination's self-sufficiency. When Yeats remembers his early longing for "pattern, for Pre-Raphaelitism, for an art allied to poetry," he is describing a community of artistic coherence, a world where truth is aesthetic pattern. When he remembers his dissatisfaction with his father's neglect of "subject" in his paintings and wishes for the romance of story which the pattern of art can celebrate, he is describing a Bedford Park on a national (Irish) scale, the extension of the world of aesthetic truth of pattern into the life of a people where history is seen as pattern, and life is seen ceremoniously as ritual.

The "three roads" around that thicket at Howth are a wall around an island of retreat "from the cares of life," but they are also thoroughfares leading away from the possible triviality of art which has no intercourse with life. When Yeats plans "Oisin" he travels along the three roads in the imagination's journeys to three islands, themselves "thickets" like that at Howth, but thickets which are related to life. The imagination's hunger for unlimited experience is in dialogue with the brute facts of necessity. The dialogue becomes a confrontation of Patrick and Oisin because two different kinds of "truth" are in conflict: the truth of aesthetic pattern which is "human truth," and the truth of "objectivity" where knowledge is not a condition of the whole being, a modification of the sensibility, but rather is abstract, separable and either "heterogeneous" or alien.

The first memory of Bedford Park was pleasant, its colony more like a "sea-engirt isle" of Yeats' earliest poetry where insularity is comforting, not oppressive. The second experience was not. When the family moved back to London (after a stay, mostly in Dublin from 1880 to 1887), that childhood garden of art was dismally changed. The contrast was actual, and was not only explainable as the result of psychological changes in the viewer. The experiment had predictably failed, the peacock blue paint had faded and peeled, and the Philistine world had made inroads into its neighbourhood. Here was a moral for an aestheticism which had no tradition deeper than taste, no weapon other than scorn or disdain with which to combat the vulgarity of the age. The choices open to artists were several: they could stay within the ever-narrowing circle, walled up from the encircling Grey Truth; they could attempt a renewal of commerce between art and everyday life (as theorized upon by Ruskin and Morris); or they could respond, as Yeats did, by extending the wall of aesthetic pattern beyond the confines of unambitious aestheticism and beyond the encircling truth of objective science, engulfing it by a pattern of greater comprehension which made it a local and temporal fiction, its materialistic convictions no more than a dream of passing consequence.

We might here say that the nature of Yeats' poetry is dramatic, not "visionary," that the proposed engulfing of contemporary history is dramatic assertion for him and not the experience of visionary assurance (as it probably was for A.E.). We might also add that Yeats, later so given to geometric imagery to describe his deepest thoughts on reality, is not too well served by the figures of his stylistic arrangement: the

cones, interpenetrating gyres, and Cartesian vortices. Neither do the more traditional geometric descriptions of "planes" of reality arranged hierarchically as levels or degrees of reality (as in a Platonic order) or as mirrored correspondences (the Hermetic order) provide more useful descriptions of the ebb and flow of the mind which contracts and expands. A figure more germane to his sensibility is the circle. The consciousness of a naturally timid introvert experiences a division between "inner" and "outer" worlds and the consciously experienced line of circumscription is more tangibly felt than in persons of more outgoing temperament. In addition, Yeats' boyhood and youthful experiences tended to reinforce the sense of distinction between his self and his environment. We can think of the Sligo boy in London, Irish, son of an artist, or of a Bedford Park in London, or of a thicket at Howth in the midst of three roads, or any of those favoured metaphors borrowed from Shelley, the sea-engirt islands of secluded, yet magical potency. This sensibility of division can be viewed schematically as antithetical but such description more accurately pertains to Yeats' dramatic employment of a sense of division. It is theoretical and philosophical, but it does not resolve the experience of division.

Bedford Park was an image of communal art where a collaboration of writers and painters provided the corroboration of pattern, where painters took for their theme a "moment" in the romance of a poem or story, and where poets wrote poems elaborating the conceptions of paintings or producing verbal patterns analogous to painting. Yeats' first need was for a marriage of the arts; it was only after the meeting with O'Leary and his introduction into a new literary purpose that he

deliberately sought out a mythic literature that was married to the rocks and hills, to the physical landscape of a nation.

The Pre-Raphaelite milieu in which Yeats began to write encouraged a close relation between the arts of painting and literature as a kind of allegorical substantiation of symbolic methods. It also encouraged poetry which had for its theme poetry itself, or the imaginative process. The close relation of literature and painting had been one of the effects of Ruskin's genius and industry; he also popularized a kind of impressionistic criticism where commentary on art was itself a creative, artistic response. A Bedford Park as a community of art has certainly some resemblances to a palace of art, and there was much in the Pre-Raphaelite spirit in its late second phase when Yeats experienced it which encouraged the desired artistic autonomy from the Philistine world by emphasizing that the subject matter or theme of literature should be literature. In a palace of art one art mirrors another, translations abound, poems are written on pictures, paintings record moments in a literary tradition. We can recall Rossetti's circle of activity: his translations of Dante, his paintings from Dantean scenes, his interest in Blake's pictures of Dantean scenes, his sonnets on pictures. Rossetti recognized no palace of art in Tennyson's sense; he had not that kind of moral conscience. However, many esthetes would find the palace which Tennyson vacated quite attractive as a retreat from Philistinism, and the more populous the inhabitants and the more numerous its artifacts, the more habitable it became as a self-sufficient world. The subject of such a world was art; in this sense it practised allegory.

The range of allegorical method and the latitude of intent is not our concern now. We are not of course concerned with paintings of allegory of social morality such as "Awakened Conscience," nor with the direct representations of biblical scenes (of Millais', for example). Nor, oppositely, are we concerned with the private significance of apparently traditional iconographic images: the symbolism of Rossetti's "Ecce Ancilla Domini" and "Girlhood of Mary Virgin." These employ traditional symbols of Christian tradition which through long association have the specific character of allegory, but which in Rossetti's painting become symbolic of a personal spiritual condition. What we are concerned with, to stay with Rossetti for the moment, is the character of a tale like "Hand and Soul" where a quest for artistic development is presented as a biography of an imaginary painter, Chiaro dell'Erma, who seems to be Rossetti himself. This Chiaro meets his Beatrice who is of literary inspiration and probably is <u>simply</u> artistic inspiration (and not the Dantean creature who is a fact of the flesh as well as a prefiguration of the spiritual life). The tale is about art, is an allegory of the imaginative process.

Among many Pre-Raphaelites Keats was esteemed because his poetry has a strong pictorial character, and because he was considered a pure poet who was least affected by intrusive ideas. One poem in particular, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," appealed as a true image of romantic art and the artist's service to beauty and sorrow. It seemed to be the archetypal expression of the imaginative process, and for artists who served the life of the imagination it imaged forth their own biography. Rossetti made three sketches on the theme of the poem, in the last two

presenting the Knight as Keats himself, on horseback with the faery lady of romantic inspiration. Morris, for whom Keats was the acknowledged "master," had asserted that this single poem contained the inspiration and story of all of his work. The young Yeats, who loved Morris' prose romance "The Man Who Never Laughed Again" over all of his works, was responding to a story which elaborated upon the Keatsian story of induction, enchantment, and then a cold awakening into the desolation of reality. In Morris' tale it is not the malevolence or ambiguous character of the lady which causes the dream to end; rather, it is the hero's questioning, his curiosity about her real character. Morris' world of fantasy can survive no such scrutiny: the imaginative world is dream not vision, nor do those dreams lead to responsibilities. Yeats must have been conscious of the allegorical significance of Morris' tale even if he was not yet ready in his early years to dispute the terms of such separated worlds of fact and fancy. And if he was so aware, one must be willing to give a special character to the "imitations" which he describes much of his earliest verse to be. Such "imitations" might better be regarded as rather sophisticated commentaries. It would be as naive to consider paintings on literary themes or poems on paintings to be simply imitative, i.e. a copying out in another medium rather than an interpretation and an extension of meaning. How much more significant must be "imitations" of works which are recognized to be themselves allegorical or symbolic of art? We can wonder with what irony Yeats in the Autobiographies recorded the anecdote of Morris' appreciation of Yeats' "Oisin," "you write my kind of poetry" and then Morris breaking off discussion to curse the design of a lampost. What seems to be little

more than a charming and characteristic sketch of Morris may have ironic implications. Morris' verse existed in a world separate from his practical aestheticism (the design of lamposts). Yeats' "imitation" of Morris, we shall later illustrate, went ironically beyond Morris' recognition of some stylistic similarities and a penchant for dream voyages, for "Oisin" is a world which includes lamposts. The door in the fanciful mountain of Morris' "The Man Who Never Laughed Again" opens only to a fanciful world. That door and mountain existed for Yeats in the actual landscape of the Sligo countryside, and that door opened to a living mythology. An article, probably written in 1887, has this interesting passage: "In the side of Ben Bulben is a white square in the limestone. It is said to be the door of fairyland. Tradition says it swings open at nightfall...Many have been carried away out of the neighbouring villages..."[44]

The young Yeats was aware of the romantic self-consciousness which attended the imitation of even the most objective of verse, the epic. The romantic's epic theme was himself and we need not be surprised to find much of the personal in "Oisin," a poem which, we shall demonstrate, was intended to be objective and racial, not subjective and personal. In shorter poems where an Irish legend is used the original intent of the poem is more readily suggested. For example, in "The Madness of King Goll," a poem to be considered shortly, the legend itself requires little adaptation to make it a parable of the romantic poet's (Yeats') difficulty in singing in the bardic manner, singing something other than an "idle" song which is too easily the fate of a singer of this

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[44]Yeats, "Irish Fairies" (The Leisure Hour, Oct. 1890).

later "empty day." "King Goll" which preceded "Oisin" is not Morris' kind of poetry. The poem is a poem about art; it is autobiographical, and J. B. Yeats' portrait of his son in the role of King Goll tearing the strings from the harp is not simply a graceful inclusion of the author. The subject of the picture is the subject of the poem. This is in the "tradition" of Rossetti's sketches of Keats as the Knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

Given Yeats' early critical outlook and the Pre-Raphaelite milieu where a literary tradition was itself a recurring theme of its literature, we must question if Yeats' early ambitions were limited to writing fanciful pastorals in innocent Arcadias, as The Island of Statues has been interpreted. We suggest that the "imitations" of Spenser and of Shelley, to name two early influences on his verse, are of interest in so far as they represent a critical estimate of a literary tradition. Yeats was both heir and critic of a Shelleyan subjectivism. In the Autobiographies he gives emphasis to the inevitability of the inheritance and makes no direct reference to a struggle with the Alastorian introversion earlier than the year 1888 when he completed "Oisin." We have ample evidence of the father's critical opinion on the Shelleyan influence and have suggested that such an attitude must have been directed towards his son's first experiments in verse. Was there a tradition of criticism known to Yeats which would have corroborated much of his father's critical attitudes towards the "egoism" of contemporary romantic poetry?

We have referred already to Yeats' apparent sympathy with Arnold's diagnosis of the ills of contemporary poetry. Arnold's corrective

remedy, that poets should attempt a more Homeric approach, may have been, indirectly, one of the inspirations behind Yeats' article on Ferguson and the attempted heroic mode of "Oisin." Arnold's Homeric definition of literature as a "criticism of life" was probably recognized by Yeats as being too readily translated (by an age full of practical moral fervour) into encouraging a poetry of obvious social utility. However, we can presume that Yeats read "Empedocles Upon Etna" and "Dover Beach" as landscapes of Romantic isolation, and in "Stanzas From the Grande Chartreuse" he had the explicit assessment of the Romantic movement, even if he had never read further into Arnold's essays. How did Yeats understand the development of English poetry after the deaths of Keats and Shelley? Specifically what was his youthful assessment of Tennyson and Browning? His later assessment as expressed in the Autobiographies and in essays are quite clear: Browning held a passing attraction for him ("moved by his air of wisdom") when he began to write. The verse play Mosada is evidence enough of the inspiration and manner of Browning. This first interest was followed by a rejection of the "psychological curiosity" of that poet's verse, a curiosity which was the counterpart of Tennyson's obsession with "scientific opinion." There seems to have been a renewed interest in Browning in the late 1920's perhaps because Yeats had gained the perspective to see how the dramatic monologue and other tactics of irony which Browning employed were the antecedents of his own evolved form, the dramatic lyric. Yeats' appreciation of the early Tennyson apparently followed the evaluation offered by Arthur Hallam in an essay which interpreted Tennyson, Shelley, and Keats as "aesthetic"

poets as distinct from the moral and reflective poets, of whom Wordsworth was the prime example. Hallam's essay was an early and abiding influence for Yeats. He had read the essay "When I first began to write" and had later in 1893 reviewed Le Gallienné's edition on Hallam with a continued appreciation of its "profound" nature.[45] The sympathies which Hallam expressed were shared by the Pre-Raphaelites, and it articulated for the young Yeats the basic criticism which he felt towards the "Victorian poetry of ideas" espoused by Edward Dowden, a family friend who figured as the literary establishment against which the young poet was to struggle. Hallam's identification of Tennyson's genius as expressed in that poet's first book of poetry with the essential aesthetic voice of poetry made Tennyson's subsequent poetic career open to adverse criticism. The later Tennyson whose verse became full of "scientific opinion" and public morality, and whom Dowden had praised for his relevance to his age, was seen by Yeats as an apostate to the religion of beauty and a victim of his age.

In the light of Tennyson's poetic "progress" after Hallam's death and after responding to the critical reviews of his early poetry, we may appreciate how Yeats would have interpreted those early dialogue poems where art and the imaginative life are arraigned by a dutiful moral conscience, and how he would have traced the degeneration of Tennyson's poetic voice into the contemporary relevance of In Memoriam, The Princess, and the Idylls of the King. The explicit allegory of "The Palace of Art" would have been recognized as a definition of the imagination's role as mere fancy, mere dreaming, a lotus land of moral

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[45]Yeats, "A Bundle of Poets" (The Speaker, July 22, 1893).

relapse. "The Lady of Shalott" could readily have been recognized as an "intricate analogy" of Shelleyan perception (the lady being a Witch of Atlas), but the moral will of Tennyson could be read in the false definition of art which the poem presents and which led to an unnecessary capitulation of the Grey Truth of a modern Camelot. The allegory Yeats would understandably have read into the poem would be quite simply the counterpart of the moral allegory which the general Victorian audience recognized and applauded. "The Lady of Shalott" was commonly recognized by contemporary criticism as being an important moral statement on the responsibilities of the poetic imagination and a key poem in Tennyson's progress into a poetry of social relevance. J. S. Mill recognized the aspiration to render "not only vivid representations of spiritual states, but [representations] symbolical of spiritual truths."[46] Other critics recognized a relevant theme amid the Keatsian beauty of the imagery: the poem had "for its real subject the emptiness of the life of fancy, however rich and brilliant, the utter satiety which compels any true imaginative nature to break through the spell which entrances it in an unreal world of visionary joys."[47] The poem was significant as a stage in the evolution of Tennyson's genius for the critic R. H. Horne, and the lady was identified as a Muse figure: "Continuing our inquiries into the fruits of Tennyson's early excursions into dreamland, we perceive that he was inclined, even when upon commoner ground, to accept the fantasy of things, for the things themselves. His Muse was

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[46]John D. Jump, ed. Tennyson: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). My brackets.

[47]From an 1888 review by R. H. Hutton, quoted by Jump, p. 353.

his own Lady of Shalott..."[48] Horne morally approves the leaving of the web and loom:

> But since 'the low sky raining' in the autumn even, when the white-robed form of the Lady of Shalott floated in the boat towards the many-towered palaces...a marked change has come over the genius of this poet with regard to his female characters... [he became]...awake to the actual world.[49]

Tennyson, it would seem for Yeats, re-wrote the theme of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and instead of progressing like Keats further, beyond romantic dejection, into the heroic attempt of the "Hyperion" poems towards a sterner Muse, Moneta, he fell back into accepting the Muse of newspaper opinion, the Lady de Veres of contemporary relevance.

In summary then, we have considered these important influences upon Yeats. First of all, the father's aesthetic values, expressed with forceful and engaging clarity, made him critical of his own tendency towards a wayward subjectivism. Secondly, his father's assertive critical manner encouraged in the son corresponding strong opinions and theories on literature. It seems probable that the young poet deliberately planned his progress, consciously following a major poet's traditional advancement from pastoral to epic: he wrote a pastoral, impatiently and ambitiously "in imitation of Spenser and Shelley" in 1884. In 1886, he was planning an epic. He had, as he assured his schoolmaster earlier, a program for his poetic development. Thirdly, he shared the aesthetic values of Pre-Raphaelitism, and admired the rich texture of its collaborative art, but he knew it to be largely

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[48]Jump, p. 157.

[49]Jump, p. 158. My brackets.

a derivative art, hopelessly passive before the moral purposiveness of the prevailing Victorian "poetry of ideas." Finally, Arnold provided the young man of limited formal education with the scholarly authority to take the measure of late English romanticism, gave a Celtic distinction to his self-conscious sense of Irish "difference," and encouraged his ambition to attempt the Homeric manner.

We can proceed now with an analysis of Yeats' earliest verse, written between 1882 and 1888. This verse experiments with several modes: there are lyrics, narrative poems, and verse dramas. As might be expected from a young poet who was full of critical opinion yet prone to subjective revery, the verse can range from satire to lyric brooding. There are poems which are openly allegorical such as "The Two Titans," a "political allegory," and "A Legend," a religious allegory. Similar in didactic manner are poems like "Kanva on Himself" and the series "Quatrains and Aphorisms" which attempt an epigrammatic expression of wisdom. Another class of poems written between 1885 and 1888 is the faery lyrics and ballads. These poems are of interest to our study only in so far as they can be considered as metaphors of the imaginative life. These poems occasionally present a playful didactic "point" but for the most part they intend to achieve a certain freshness by a deliberately naive manner. They have the authority (if such is needed) of folk belief just as the Arcadian play, The Island of Statues, has its authority, or sanction for imaginative expression in the literary tradition of pastoral. What we will look for in the fairy poems and in the lyrics and "plot" of The Island of Statues is their implied critical views of "nature" as popularly presented in the sentimental verse of the

Wordsworthian manner, and the more overt criticism of scientific "Grey Truth," which found popular expression in the "Victorian poetry of ideas." The world of fairy is, metaphorically, the imaginative life, and the direction of its growth through charming folk-lore to the more substantial tradition of myth moves Yeats into a theory of the Anima Mundi as a repository of the imaginative life which has dwindled in modern times to mere fairy tale. We will also observe how this verse expresses a critical dissatisfaction with a degenerated literary tradition.

Several fragments of Yeats' earliest verse (written probably in 1882) are presented by Ellmann in Yeats: The Man and the Masks. These fragments, predictably, have a style and themes quite Shelleyan, and express the understandable uncertainty of youthful experiment. Ellmann quotes passages to illustrate their "lack of poetic theory beyond the necessity of writing about and in favour of dreams," and notes that the use of symbolism is vague and uncertain, sometimes "half-way to allegory," sometimes "of deliberate obscurity."[50] Ellmann's selection and account of the examples he presents are governed by his intention to illustrate how derivative this early verse was, and to point out by comparison to later verse the advance made in metrical craft and the gradual evolution of more recognizable themes. The "adumbrations of future themes are still primitive and half-formed,"[51] he notes, and pursuing a line of analysis which has as its point of reference the philosophy of later, mature verse, Ellmann finds a "curious irresolution"

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[50]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 32.

[51]Ibid., p. 36.

even in poems like "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" which Yeats continued to have published, and an apparent confusion in the planning of the long poem, "Oisin." While we do not question the fact that there is much that is vague and shifting in this early verse, there are lines of argument which are more than dim adumbrations of later themes, and to recognize their significance as aesthetic statements one must forebear generalizing on their esthete, escapist character. The first fragment Ellmann presents evidences, he says, Yeats' first conception of the role of poetry: "Poetry was to provide a refuge from the unrest of the world of action."[52]

> No rime empassioned of envenomed years
> Or the embattled earth--a song should be
> A painted and be-pictured argosy
> And as a crew to guide her wandering days
> Sad love and change...[53]

This fragment might be read as a statement on the nature of poetry both in its relation to life and in its intrinsic qualities. Life, characterized as the "embattled earth," antithetically points up the desirability of the dream world, and the young poet, like Keats in "Sleep and Poetry," announces as the immediate end of poetry the giving of respite from the thorns and burrs of life. This is an understandable expression of aesthetic values from a poet who was "in all things pre-Raphaelite." It combines a Keatsian pictorial vividness with a loaded richness of detail. The usual critical response to such lines is to observe how simply esthete and escapist such a conception of poetry is. It is such, if it is to be held accountable as a statement

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[52] Ibid., p. 29.

[53] Ibid., p. 29.

on the function of literature. However, the statement is really "literary"; that is, its substance, not only its manner is literary, the "embattled earth" being not the earth of real experience but rather a literary convention useful for antithesis. In other words, the subject of these lines is poetry, not life, and the "embattled earth" is a literary boundary which gives some form to an otherwise mind-becalmed argosy. It expresses an ideal of poetic beauty like that of Keats in "Sleep and Poetry" where the present expression of sensations sweet is considered a sufficient if not the final end of poetry. Yeats renders the sensuous as a wistful "Sad love," in the idiom of the more rarefied and spiritual convention of a late romanticism. We perhaps labour a point, but if the lines can be said to reject anything, it is not "life" but rather the aesthetics of a popular Victorian poetry of "ideas."

Such a passage, however innocent it was as a statement of "aestheticism," was open to criticism for its extreme symptoms of passive subjectivity. If this is what "a song should be" there is, by implication, the suggestion that its singer is a dreamer who has surrounded himself with moods, "wearing moods" as Dowden would say. The poet-figure in so far as he exists within these lines seems a drifting, indeterminate figure, be-calmed on a solipsist sea of revery. That Yeats felt this inadequacy, or was criticized for it by his father, is evident in passages written later. Poems about poetry are followed by poems about poets, and a compensatory assertiveness is to be seen in attempted dramatizations of poet-figures "proud and solitary...A changeless thing among the changing crowd," and as magicians of secret

might. The naturally timid youth seeks the compensatory assertion of power ("hidden," of course) and loneliness is wistfully translated as solitary strength. The transparent character of verse through which one can see both the "sad soliloquy" of the subject and the borrowed literary posture is evident in another fragment.

> Cyprian [speaks]
> I live in this lake girt tropic island
> Never a human eye has seen it
> Never a boat has touched its magic strand
> Long centuries ago I pitied man
> And passed o'er the world a spirit of unrest
> And rebellion 'gainst the race of Sleeping Gods
> But men were mad and thought that they were blest
> Misery was but a toll for living
> That Olympian Zeus was good and slept
> That the devil of the robber nation
> Was good though they for all ages wept
> Yet thou[gh] I am cursed with immortality
> I was molden with a human nature
> With the centuries old age came on me
> And weary of flying from the wrath of nations
> I long since crossed the mountain
> Seeking some peace from the worlds throbbing
> And sought out a little fountain
> Plaining because no nymph had decked his valley
> And then I spoke to it a word of might
> And it heard the oreads language
> It spread a lake of glittering light
> Then once more I spoke that tongue
> And there rose a stately island
> Bright with the radiance of flowers
> And I stood upon its dry streme[54]

The "embattled land" of the earlier verse, now presented with more Shelleyan detail, slumbers under religious and political tyranny. The world of men may occasionally spur the poet-figure into passing satire (the "robber nation" is perhaps even here something more than literary borrowing) but there is only the gesture of relating the poetic imagination to life. The justification for Cyprian's withdrawal is

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[54] Ibid., p. 30.

elaborately borrowed from Shelley: Yeats is writing a mannered Witch of Atlas before writing his Promethean myth which a later involvement with a "robber nation" and "Sleeping Gods" would encourage. The subjective response of Cyprian is presented as justifiable by the hopeless idolatry of the objective world which, as J. B. Yeats would probably have admitted, might only be served by a Victorian muse intent upon a practical and immediate improvement. But one can guess at the father's criticism of the subjective solution of living alone on a "lake-engirt tropic island" where all must perforce be soliloquy and never dramatic utterance. His criticism was probably one reason for the young poet's writing of four verse dramas during 1884.

These verse plays, in order of their composition, are Time and Vivien, Love and Death, Mosada, and The Island of Statues. The first three plays will be discussed briefly before proceeding to a long analysis of The Island of Statues. They are attempts at dramatic verse, working within the philosophic themes of the antithetical nature of experience (as in Time and Vivien and Love and Death), or within a plot of tragic division (as in the Browning-inspired Mosada). Within these frames, Yeats finds "dramatic" occasions for long lyrics which in themselves are far from dramatic utterance. The general effect is one of mixed styles, brisk dialogue and action alternating with long sections of revery. The borrowed vigour of the Browning setting and manner in Mosada, for example, provides a cover for Mosada's long soliloquies on eastern or occult wisdom which are expressed in dream-like trance. Mosada expresses a romantic and imaginative vision of an "Enchantress fair" whose dwelling is "in a tree-enrapt isle" and whose siren song of

beauty calls the Alastor seekers of the world to sail their "argosies" in quest of her. They sail, and "sailing died," a fitting theme and mood to accompany Mosada as she takes poison and dreams into her death. The potency of her imaginative vision slumbers on a prolonged elegaic mood and never seems worthy of Ebremar's description of the heresy of an imaginative power that would "have sung/The world to its fierce infancy again." Mosada's revery is saved from futile subjectivism by the plot, and by Ebremar's energetic witch hunting which bequeaths a kind of substance to her theme which would otherwise be as vapid as the earlier Cyprian's claims for the potency of his imagination on his "lake-engirt isle." Vapid vision on the one hand and a worldly sophistication and cunning on the other are juxtaposed melodramatically. Mosada's revery borrows drama from the plot of Ebremar's persecution, and in turn bequeaths a suggestion of mystery and occult wisdom to the play. Mosada's revery still speaks the language of Shelley, such is her literary intimation of the Anima Mundi.

A prefatory poem to Vivien and Time dated January 1884 follows:

I've built a dreaming palace
With stones from out the old
And singing days, within their graves
Now lying calm and cold.

Of the dreamland marble
Are all the silent walls
That grimly stand, a phantom band
About the Phantom halls.

There among the pillars
Are many statues fair
Made of the dreamland marble
Cut by the dreamers care.

And there I see a statue
  Among the maids of old
On either hand, a goodly band
  So calmly wise and cold.[55]

The poem is a definition of the world of art which corrects the esthete drift of a "be-pictured argosy" with something of the proud and solitary. It asserts, in what must have been a conscious reference to Tennyson's palace of art, Yeats' preference for an art serving dream rather than contemporary relevance. Tennyson's antithetical worlds presented the world of pure imagination as simply the beguiling evasion of life's realities, a world of fanciful desire. We can note that Yeats' poem expresses none of this sense of indulgent dreaming. The dreams are cut from stone, and the very phrase "dreamland marble" suggests an enduring substantiality not the fading stuff of fancy. The apparently defensive admission of "dream" should not obscure the fact that there is a potency within the cold repose of these marble creations. They are, of course, also expressive of an aspiration towards artistic composure sought by a young poet whose uncertainty and self-doubt earlier had aspired to the "high and solitary" pose. They reflect the painter's eye for clear form and the poet's desire for "story," although that story is as yet not articulated. In its place there is a Coleridgean ritual manner which is intended to express both the self-sufficiency of the dream and its mysterious potency. An expression of a desired style, the poem looks forward to the quatrains of "In a Drawing Room" and its epigrammatic wisdom. In one of these quatrains the patient beauty of an Attic bust smiles in a dim alcove at the "twitter of lips

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[55]Ibid., p. 33.

of dust," an expression of the superiority of enduring art over life's transience. But Yeats' subject is more man's resinous heart which creates art, than the classical theme of art's composed perfection, and in The Island of Statues we can view an allegorical presentation of a progression towards the responsibilities of dream, an awakening into more heroic subject matter.

George Russell, in one of his letters, refers to Yeats' planning of a work whose subject was "a sculptor's garden."[56] This sketch may have evolved into The Island of Statues; the original plan is not known. We have suggested the attractiveness of the image of statuary for a young poet whose mind was characteristically shifting and wandering. For the poet who was acutely aware of vacillation there would always be an attraction in an art of polished completeness. Yeats would later esteem Lionel Johnson's poetry for its cold classical perfection, and would quote with approval Johnson's favourite description of an art of "marmorean stillness." However, in 1884, Yeats' verse was experimental and explorative; he was not moving towards a classicism of frozen statuary. The statues in the prefatory poem to Vivien and Time are dreaming: they express both the aspiration for an assured, composed style in writing, and his longing for romantic story. A poet whose earliest poems were about poetry and whose heroes were poet figures would recognize the imagery as self-revelatory. The Island of Statues, written after the other plays, after the philosophic antitheses of Love and Death, and the melodrama of Mosada, would not reasonably be a

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[56]Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939 (Toronto: MacMillan, 1967), p. 43.

relapse into a fanciful Arcadia. It can be read as a drama about poetry, a parable on poetic development.

The dreamland marble on the island is awakened into a community of heroic song by the end of that play. That the awakened heroes choose to remain as Arcadians is not evidence of a continued if elaborated estheticism of Yeats, but quite simply expressive of the fact that the poet, before meeting O'Leary and seeing an opportunity in national myth for writing heroic verse in a living tradition, had only a literary locality for his awakened heroes. The direction Yeats was taking is further illustrated in the projected work which he planned immediately after writing The Island of Statues. In early 1886 he was planning an epic or a tragedy (the proposed titles were variously The Blindness, The Epic of the Forest, The Equator of Olives).[57] The proposed setting was not quite a "crater on the moon" as a later Yeats in the Autobiographies dismisses the extravagance of the intended work. The setting was to be Spain, more terrestrial perhaps, but still exotic and literary. With the decision to write in the tradition of Irish myth, Yeats found a soil which he felt would nourish a living art "of the people." The material which he had prepared for that proposed epic or tragedy went, apparently, into "Oisin."

The Island of Statues, subtitled "An Arcadian Fairy Tale," is described by Yeats in the Autobiographies as "an Arcadian play in imitation of Edmund Spenser." It has a pastoral setting, and employs the convention of competing love songs (after the manner of Spenser's The Shepherd's Calendar) as Thernot and Colin attempt to woo Naschina.

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[57]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 46.

The story is a romance which is reminiscent of Book VI of The Faerie Queene; Naschina, like Pastorella, prefers the heroic potential of Almintor to the shepherd Swains. Openly designated as an Arcadian fairy tale, the play would seem to be innocent of any significance beyond this. There is little doubt that Yeats valued a literary tradition which ante-dated Romantic subjectivism and which provided a certain autonomy from a prying criticism which valued contemporary "ideas" in poetry. Such Arcadian poetry had, indeed, been proposed by him as a defiant assertion of true art's indifference to a public which favoured utilitarian art. In the Autobiographies he asserts just such an intention. He proposed to Todhunter that he write verse plays in a pastoral tradition:

> Since I was seventeen I had constantly tested my own ambition with Keats's praise of him who left 'great verse unto a little clan', so it was but natural that I should persuade him for the moment that we had nothing to do with the great public, that it should be a point of honour to be content with our own little public, that he should write of shepherds and shepherdesses because people would expect them to talk poetry and move without melodrama. He wrote his Sicilian Idyll...[58]

We may well doubt if this expresses the whole truth behind his own poetry which used a pastoral setting. It was in fact a convenient tradition to disguise literary ambitions which went far beyond pastoral simplicity. This tradition, like the tradition of folk-lore which the faery tales presented, disarmed sceptical criticism but it did not define the limit of the young poet's ambitions. The poet who "constantly tested my own ambitions with Keats's praise of him who left 'great verse

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[58] Auto., p. 120.

unto a little clan'" had doubtless some theory about what constituted "great" verse, and it lay beyond the pastoral. Let the older Todhunter guard the purity of art, the young Yeats was actively seeking for a larger expression of those forces which made a literature "great."

The play could be described as a loose assemblage of lyrics presented in a hopefully "dramatic" context. Pastoral love songs are followed by Shelleyan "voices" (in the manner of Prometheus Unbound), all of which are superimposed upon a pastoral landscape. The effect of pastiche is unavoidable because the lyric moments of song distract from the action of the plot to the point where the reader comes to conclude that the plot is no more than a convenience for the display of various styles. There is no doubt that there is some validity in such a response for within the freedom of a romance there is the tendency for lyric enthusiasm to waylay narrative intention. However, the plot does move the principal characters from the pastoral setting and themes of the early scenes of the play to the heroic setting of the island by the play's conclusion. The sequence of lyrics can be recognized as a landscape of art through which the poet figure, Almintor, progresses.

Scene one opens with Colin and Thernot competing in their love songs for Naschina. Songs of the joy of love are countered by songs of love's sorrow in a display of counterpointed styles suggestive of Browning and Shelley. The tendency of Yeats' temperament resolves in favour of the plaintive, and Thernot's song gravitates towards the beguiling theme of love's sorrow. Almintor, the hunter, enters upon the scene. He is a poet-figure whose lyric manner, "The whole world's sadly talking to itself" is self-conscious to the point where Yeats has

him mimicked by his servant. The early scenes are interesting in that they present such self-consciousness amounting to apology. One senses the influence of the father here in the poet's critical awareness which mocks or excuses his own experiments with song. The object of all song is Naschina, a somewhat scornful lady who, tired of these soft strains, compares them to the small gifts brought to her by Arcadian admirers, "sad sea-shells where little echoes sit." Her longing for heroes of "courage" and "might" initiates the action of the play, but not before Yeats has had the opportunity of presenting, however self-defensively, lines such as the above. The setting and action on the enchanted island of statues succeeds the acute self-consciousness of the opening scenes, but continues the imagery of loneliness and lack of communication (there are echoes everywhere) or the correlative idea of silent unintelligible completeness of being: "And full of wisdom is each flower" on the island. The previous seekers of the magic flower, described as "star-fought wanderers," have been transformed into statues. The flowers, only one of which is the magic bloom, baffle all seekers. They are described, "Each shining clear as some unbaffled star" and observe silently the fate of men like the stars overhead:

> The ageless sentinels who hold their watch
> O'er grief. The world drinks sorrow from the beams
> And penetration of their eyes.

It is apparent that the poet himself is haunted by the theme of division, and mocked by images of completeness of being. The voices, echoes, and stars are Shelleyan but they do not lead and direct the action so much as baffle it.

That the romantic "plot" of the play reveals basic and persisting themes of Yeats is the thesis which Engelberg puts forward in his article "'He too was in Arcadia': Yeats and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall." Engelberg proposes that the play

> ...anticipates a view of Arcadia as a fallen Eden, and this carries important implications into the later poetry; and it presents us with an early insight by a young poet into a crucial distinction--that between a state of 'happiness' and a state of 'peace'.[59]

The mysterious voice which sings to visitors to the island of Eve and apples, "I was at her sinning..." and the references made by the awakened statues to Helen and to Dido are evidence, Engelberg says, of an historical sense which presents Arcadia as an Eden of peaceful stasis (and statuesque immobility). Naschina's plucking of the flower, like Eve's action, frees the seekers from an inhuman perfection and "peace" and returns them to a world of human happiness (ironically possible only in the condition of time and change).

The climax of the play, which Engelberg singles out as especially revealing, occurs as a new moon floods light upon Naschina, Almintor, and the other "seekers." All cast their shadow of mortality except for Naschina who has been fated with immortal life by the Enchantress whom she supplants. However, no explanation is given for Naschina's state, nor does Engelberg make any conjecture upon her possible significance. Naschina's immortal state does have its point, however, when we consider her function as inspiration for the action of a poetic quest. The play

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[59]Edward Engelberg, "'He Too Was in Arcadia': Yeats and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," in In Excited Reverie: A Centennial Tribute to William Butler Yeats, 1865-1939 (ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross, New York: MacMillan, 1965), p. 70.

is not only a device for presenting lyrics, it is also a play about poetry, and about the levels of poetic inspiration. She inspires the action and the action is usually explicitly related to a poetic performance. The shepherds compete to sing her praises best and fight a duel in which one dies. The second shepherd dies (as does his minor poetry) as he drowns attempting to swim to the island of the heroic. Almintor's action under Naschina's taunting is the effort to find some heroic utterance beyond elegaic lyricism. On the island, Naschina's choice of the right flower breaks the spell and frees the previous seekers from their ossified state. The classic themes of Dido, of Arthur, of Helen, are "freed" from some sepulchral academe back into a world of living flesh and blood. Naschina, among other things, is the timeless Muse, the embodiment of poetic inspiration. The "goblin flower of joy" plucked by her transforms a world of dead mythology (the statues), and of somnolent narcissism (the Lotus-like flowers of narcotic self-completeness), into an heroic living community of song. They do not leave the island. They exist in a world of literary inspiration which cannot find its heroic expression in the contemporary world. Yeats still had not found a tradition which lived outside of books.

The play with its references to Dido and Helen of ancient inspiration suggests a dissatisfaction with the voice and themes of contemporary poetry. The quest of Almintor, while in itself a very romantic quest, is presented as a development away from the lyrics and elegies of the shepherds' songs. Naschina's references to Pan and the old gods being supplanted by Christianity, a convention of pastoral,

implies also contemporary relevance. This reference and the definition of the "Grey Truth" which blights the modern imagination looks forward to the employment in the Oisin legend of allegorical commentary on the decline of an heroic tradition in literature, and the hopes for its renaissance. The Island of Statues has its Alastor figure in Almintor but he is a seeker, among other things, for a poetic tradition beyond the romantic's search for the personal "self."

The allegorical element in the play may have directed the plot but it did not scrupulously control the expression of lyrics. To claim that there is a disproportion between intention and performance would also be misleading because the play is deliberately loose to accommodate the display of versatility in styles and the complexities of theme (all the antitheses of divine and human, mortal and immortal which carry over from the earlier play Love and Death). One can perhaps describe the allegory of stages of poetic growth as intermittent, evidencing the strain between natural inclination and a more purposive aesthetic conscience. Almintor may be an uncharacteristic hunter prone to elegaic moods, but he is fairly representative as a poet-figure for Yeats. The presence of Naschina in scene one reduces him to the level of hopeless and lacrymose adulation which might be more fitting for a shepherd like Colin. Almintor would become a shepherd:

> I'd drive the woolly sheep
> If so I might, along a dewy vale
> Where all night long the heavens weep and weep

Like Endymion he is moon-struck by "the white Sad Lady of the deep." Indulgence in a favourite lyric mode is allowed its expression, but Naschina is a sterner Muse and conscience. She presents to the poet of

natural dreamy indolence the challenge of poetic growth.

Almintor, who wooed a Naschina of flesh and blood, marries an allegorical abstraction which "casts no shadow." Her world, unlike the world of legend or history (of Dido and Helen), is a world of words. Her lover, Almintor, is described by her as

> he who hath the halcyon's wing
> A flaming minstrel-word upon his crest.

Words have given immortality to Dido and Helen, but poets who give immortality to others give their lives to a Muse who casts no shadow of comforting substantiality. Is this island of heroic song also a state of advanced imaginative perception? Is the "flaming minstrel-word" the word of Life itself, and all creation "Only a sudden flaming word" as one line in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" suggests? Such momentary expressions of the nature of the poetic imagination are not pursued. Yeats shrinks back from their momentous implication, their assertion being more bravado than insight.

Naschina who performed her role of leading the poet-figure to more heroic themes lost her mortal substantiality, and this loss (which we have suggested logically evolves from her role as a Muse) presented problems for Yeats. The statues of previous seekers find their flesh and blood again but Naschina in renewing their life becomes herself an immortal who must endure the inevitable mortality of her lover. She has become a living statue, as it were, burdened with immortality. Whether Yeats felt compelled by some aesthetic impulse of symmetry to produce her transformation as a complementary truth is difficult to say. In any event, her transformation raised many questions and her

abstraction perplexed him. Writing to Katherine Tynan four years later, in September 1888, he recalls: "The early poems I know to be quite coherent, and at no time are there clouds in my details, for I hate the soft modern manner. The clouds began four years ago. I was finishing the 'Island'. They came and robbed Naschina of her shadow."[60] Naschina, whose role was intended to liberate the poet from the narrow confines of a too-subjective art, lost her objective character and became a principle. Was she then nothing more than a mirror of his own aspirations towards objectivity? Yeats, who drew his inspiration from the brooding revery of his own mind, was repeatedly threatened by a subjectivity that would close over him, drowning him in the purposeless wandering and shapelessness of Hodos Chameliontis. After 1884 his occult studies which were to provide him with objective authority for his own beliefs ("allies for my secret thought") often led him into a formless maze which his poetic imagination feared. There are repeated references during the 1890's to the perils of Hodos Chameliontis. As late as 1904 we read in a letter to George Russell the recurrent nature of this problem for the poet. He has been writing on the "prevailing decadence" in modern poetry which expresses a "womanish introspectiveness." His topic is specifically the formlessness of the sentimental, but behind his description lies the experience of the man for whom subjectivity sometimes threatened chaos of thought:

> My own early subjectiveness rises at rare moments and yours nearly always rises above sentiment to a union with a pure energy of the spirit, but between this energy of the spirit and the energy of the will

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[60] Wade, p. 88.

> out of which epic and dramatic poetry comes there is a region of brooding emotions full of fleshly waters and vapours which kill the spirit and the will, ecstasy and joy equally. Yet this region of shadows is full of false images of the spirit and of the body....As so often happens with a thing one has been tempted by and is still a little tempted by, I am roused by it to a kind of frenzied hatred which is quite out of my control.[61]

The "region of shadows" described above is precisely the effect caused by Naschina's shadowless state. The shadow spectre of Blake and the Kabbalistic shadow, "the unbalanced duplicate" of every influence implied in this letter, was not likely to have been in Yeats' mind when he wrote The Island of Statues. But it is not fanciful to suggest that the shadowless Naschina was Yeats' shadow, or a mirror image of the poet replaying the Alastor role of a futile quest. In any event, the image perplexed and bothered him. Quite likely, if not "roused by it to a kind of frenzied hatred," he would seek to exorcise this ghost of Alastor.

In the short dramatization "The Seeker," written just after The Island of Statues, there is a brief gothic dispatch of the Alastor theme. This piece is obviously an allegorical statement on the hopeful exorcism of an influence. The Knight, who has led three-score years of "dream-led wandering," his eyes "star-envious," moves through the landscape of art presented in The Island of Statues. He passes through the pastoral scene where he receives fearful directions from timid shepherds and moves towards the "goblin wood" lured on by the dream that has haunted his life. He discovers not intellectual beauty, nor his soul, but rather the figure of his wasted life, a bearded witch "Infamy."

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[61]Wade, p. 434.

The point of the allegory is melodramatically reinforced. As the Knight lies dying, he watches his disillusion and death agony in a mirror held up by that ironically-minded witch. Yeats here is exorcising an influence, holding a mirror up to its own excess.

Before moving on to poetry written after "The Seeker" we must consider the character of the earliest version of The Shadowy Waters which was being written in 1884. The play was heavily revised over some fifteen years before being presented publicly. The difficulties Yeats had with its composition were in part due to his involvement with its mysterious occult quest, an involvement which apparently became more confusing as he explored the theme. Again, the love theme was probably complicated by the changing relations with Maud Gonne during the 1890's (she was alternately a partner in a mystical marriage with Yeats, and a prospective bride who would cast a shadow of present reality). Another complication was the form of the projected work: Yeats' increasing experience with writing plays made him realize the dramatic inadequacies of much that he had written earlier. Our concern is with the character of the earliest version which, according to George Russell, existed in some form as early as 1884, the year when most of the poetry we have been discussing was written.

Writing in a preface to Letters to the New Island in 1934, Yeats recalled an obsessive theme of the verse play: "Sometimes the barrier between myself and other people filled me with terror; an unfinished poem, and the first and never finished version of The Shadowy Waters had this terror for their theme."[62]

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[62]Yeats, Letters to the New Island, ed. with intro. by Horace Reynolds (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. xii.

David Clark, in an article on the play, prints part of the early unpublished manuscript. Clark attempts to trace Yeats' original plan through rather shadowy sources. He quotes from an unpublished memoir of a George Roberts who recalls George Russell's recollection of an early version. Forgael, in the intended plot, leaves Dectora to journey alone to the infinite:

> ...a tired wanderer, having come through all experiences and reached dissatisfaction sets out to seek the infinite, he meets a woman whom he thinks immortal, and filled with the eternal love--but finding this love but the reflection of his own desire he leaves her and goes off alone to the Infinite...[63]

This version, supposedly dating from 1884, may or may not have preceded the fragment "The Seeker," and we cannot know if the ghost of Alastor revived again in Forgael or if the knight's end was the termination of the aspirations of this early Forgael for the infinite. In any event, Forgael moves in a world of reflecting surfaces of mirrors and shields in this manuscript, and he seems haunted by the awareness that his tale is simply an allegory of his state of mind. Yeats, we can assume, was not so involved with his character that he was not aware of Forgael's awareness; and perhaps for this reason, if a drama of a character's self-recognition was not intended, he did not complete the play. In the manuscript, Forgael's world collapses as he recognizes the truth of Dectora,

> Away from me away from me. You too.
> You too. Your eyes are but
> My eyes, your voice is but my voice.

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[63]David R. Clark, "'Half the Characters Had Eagle Faces': W. B. Yeats's Unpublished Shadowy Waters" (Massachusetts Review, VI, 1964-65), p. 171.

and discovers that even the monster Fomor who provide the dangerous environment for his heroic posture are but fictional embodiments of a self-dramatization. Yeats' revision tries to work out this difficulty and by 1905 he has Forgael see Dectora's mortal shadow. One of the eagle-headed predators in this early version admits that his is a contingent existence,

> for I too am one of (the?) gods he has
> fashioned with his thoughts and his desires.[64]

Yeats would seem to have reached an impasse in the play. Wanting heroic action, yet caught in the tradition of Shelley's Prometheus who comes to recognize that even Zeus has final significance only as a principle within one's mind, that heroic, external world evaporates. Forgael's realizations probably came too close to moral observation to have a continued appeal for Yeats.

In The Island of Statues, the stars which "hold their watch/O'er grief" universalize the theme of Almintor's early mood ("All the world's sadly talking to itself") and underline the fact that there is no Wordsworthian bond of sympathy between mankind and nature. Nor is there really presented an elegaic communion. The stars are rather Shelleyan symbols of man's desire for the infinite. Human hearts "drink sorrow" from stars which are images of completeness and indifference. We experience in these images the condition presented in the lyric "The Song of the Sad Shepherd" published in October 1886, where a lonely wanderer cries out for sympathy to nature. That wanderer is sealed off from any contact: sands hum, stars sing, the sea cries out, the dew

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[64]Clark, p. 178.

drops, images of complete self-absorption, listen to the sound of their own dropping. Their completeness of being mocks his state. The shell which he finally picks up to find some small comfort, the romantic's lyric shell ("...where little echoes sit"?), does not transform the wanderer's lament into song but changes all "to inarticulate moan."

Its companion poem, printed in Crossways, comes from the play, The Island of Statues, and is entitled "The Song of the Happy Shepherd." The happy shepherd's world offers the dualism of an external world of Grey Truth (the optic glass gives the single vision of Blake's condemnation) and the internal world of "human truth." The shell in the happy shepherd's song is an image of subjectivity, but it is an evasive, defensive image, not one of expressed potency. It calls to mind the shell of the ear, its world being the inner world of the mind with its "echo-harbouring" thoughts. We recall Keats' earliest ode, the ode to Psyche, with its singing to "thine own conched ear." Yeats' last stanza presents a subjective region much like Keats' "In some unknown region of the mind." However, the conclusion is evasive if not escapist. "I must be gone..." initiates a direction which moves away from resolution, or even confrontation. The shell image was more often (as we have suggested in The Island of Statues) an image of a dangerous subjectivism. The image appears again in a recollection of those early years when he remembers sitting in a library "in futile revery listening to my own mind as if to the sounds in a sea shell."[65] No harmony is sought for in external nature, no imaginative vision pierces through the veil of man's fiction, his "science," to a reality beyond. The fact of

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[65] Letters to the New Island, p. xi.

two truths is accepted and the poet emphasizes the separation through the imagery of centrifugal forces of the objective world: the dreary dance of time and the passing stars are "whirled" away from a human truth which, oppositely, must find its solace in the whorls of subjective thought, in the lyric voice of an echoing sea-shell. The poem is organized on the basis of these two motions which treat the essential subject matter of the later poem "The Two Trees." The spiraling forces look forward to the concept of gyres but in this poem there is no complex interpenetration of forces. The "star-bane" is evaded, not faced, and the only comfort from its influence is the "pearly brotherhood" offered by the shell's song.

Daiches has observed that the poems "The Song of the Sad Shepherd," "The Madness of King Goll" and "The Stolen Child" present in their "dialectic" a criticism of the Wordsworthian relationship between man and nature. The early poems, "...for all their use of some traditional romantic properties contain implicit criticisms of the falsity and sentimentality of at least one romantic attitude to nature." These poems present, Daiches concludes, the "inhumanity of faery or nature,"[66] a theme which Yeats later extends and develops.

That Yeats was consciously critical of Wordsworth is evident from his enthusiasm for Arthur Hallam's essay (to be considered later) which defines the poetic genius of Keats and Shelley, both of whom were favourite poets for Yeats, by contrasting their "aesthete" genius with the moral genius of Wordsworth. The severity of Yeats' condemnation of

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[66]David Daiches, "The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns," in In Excited Reverie: A Centennial Contribution to W. B. Yeats 1865-1939, p. 55.

Wordsworth appears in an article written in 1889 where he writes of him as a poet who "finds his image in every lake or puddle. He has to burden the skylark with his care before he can celebrate it. He is always a lens coloured by self."[67]

In the light of this established antagonism in Yeats' mind, Marion Witt's observation on a probable literary source for "The Song of the Sad Shepherd" becomes significant. She comments on the imagery of that poem:

> The shell as a symbol for poetry or the poetic imagination is familiar in romantic verse, and Yeats evidently knew it from his reading of Prometheus Unbound and The Prelude. In Wordsworth's dream the shell of poetry is even opposed to the Euclidean stone of scientific knowledge as Yeats contrasts his shell to the 'cold star-bane' of the astronomers.[68]

The dream vision which introduces the passage in The Prelude would have had a natural attraction for Yeats, and the subject upon which Wordsworth was musing before falling asleep, on the relationship of poetic and mathematical truth, was a central subject for him. Indeed the imagery and myth is archetypal to Romanticism as Auden has illustrated in The Enchafed Flood. Miss Witt's description of Wordsworth's presentation of the shell as "opposed to" the stone might better be termed "distinguished from." For in the Wordsworth passage mathematical knowledge is in no sense inimical to the spirit of poetry. He remembers the joys of learning geometry,

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[67]Yeats, "The Children of Lir," reprinted in Letters to the New Island, p. 55.

[68]Marion Witt, "Yeats's 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd'," (Philological Quarterly, xxxii, Oct. 1953, 1-8), p. 6.

> ...a sense
> Of permanent and universal sway
> And paramount belief... (The Prelude, VI, 130-132)

and considers the discipline a healthy corrective for a poet's natural subjectivism,

> ...Mighty is the charm
> Of those abstractions to a mind beset
> With images and haunted by herself. (VI, 158-160)

Indeed, Euclid's elements teach a moral lesson, for its study,

> ...held acquaintance with the stars
> And wedded soul to soul in purest love
> Of reason, undisturbed by space or time.
> (V, 103-105)

Yeats in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" conveniently relates the imaginative blight of "cold star-bane" with Wordsworth's supposed later apostasy from the imaginative life. Euclidean abstraction has become the dominant "Grey Truth" of the poem, and the shell of poetic inspiration, once the trumpet voice of prophecy, has dwindled to a lyric echo. The starlight elsewhere in The Island of Statues is Shelleyan, and has something of the glamour of a lost cause about it, but in the Shepherd poem it is alien or even malign. (It becomes an important image in "Oisin" as part of the allegory of poetry's diminishing imaginative power.) The oppressive weight of the Grey Truth in the Shepherd poem is not successfully resolved, nor even adequately countered by an appeal to the human truth of the shell's lyric response. Yeats does not develop the potential of the "painted toy" beyond ironic statement, nor does he explore the thought of the whole world as one "flaming word" as a vaster, comprehending truth. The argument of the poem, "Words alone are certain good," Ellmann

observes is evasive and indeed contradictory.[69] Perhaps the most that can be said of the poem's resolution is Engelberg's conclusion that it is "...dedicated to a self-trust, but not to a self-pity, nor to a wasteful regret for a vanished past."[70] Certainly the poem is deficient in the imaginative vision of a Blake. Hazard Adams, in his book on Blake and Yeats, makes the deprecating evaluation: "For the poet to hear his own words in the shell may have some vague emotional effect, but the suggestion that from such self-enclosure comes truth of the heart is somewhat weak and itself was fully suggestive of decadence..."[71] The poem, he continues, is an inadequate response because of its dwelling "...upon the subjective side of the epistemological dichotomy. It deals with private sensation and emotion lamenting a sorry state of affairs..."[72]

However, the poem remains interesting because it and its companion piece define the universe of Yeats' sensibility, a universe from which the poet never extricated himself. Even when Yeats later develops the idea of "painted" truth, calling the Grey Truth Newtonian or Lockeian fiction, this does not release the poet from its historical reality, nor does a theory of a cyclic history free the poet from the contemporary moment. We might, for a moment, dwell upon the complexities of Yeats' divided world which was conditioned by more pressing historical forces

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[69]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 38.

[70]Engelberg, "'He Too Was in Arcadia'...," p. 72.

[71]Hazard Adams, Blake and Yeats: the Contrary Vision (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955), p. 148.

[72]Adams, p. 148.

than Blake had experienced. To argue a lack of imaginative power, as Adams suggests, is to neglect to recognize Yeats' imaginative sense of the failure of the romantic vision to sustain itself in the face of science's impersonal abstractions. Unlike Blake, Yeats had inherited the experience of romanticism's decline from a world-transforming imaginative power to the self-doubt of Tennyson's "The Two Voices" and to the muted lyricism of a poetry which in Arnold's phrase was but an allegory of the poet's mind. The Wordsworthian world was dead, and better dead than sentimentally nursed in its senility. This is the "argument" of the sad shepherd's song. The human truth presented somewhat defensively in the happy shepherd's song could perhaps be somewhat dramatized by a posture of the "lonely and proud" but such a response would only increase the sense of alienation. To escape from solipsism, to find a subject for a poet's song, required a redefinition of the human truth as a tradition. Knowing his values to be at odds with the facts of an "objective" age, Yeats did not bridge the gulf between two worlds as Blake did; rather, he developed what can be appropriately described as a psychological theory of truth in which the experience of "unity of being" would be possible in the face of Euclidean abstraction. In these poems we have the simple recognition of a later more complex theme: that man is the maker of "truth" in the face of history's "facts." Such truth is the experience of fullness, of completion, the truth of personality's "dramatic utterance." It would be described as the circle of being wherein blood, imagination, and intellect run together. Its inclusiveness would be psychological not philosophic, and it would not successfully encompass and "explain"

the "objective" Grey Truth of science. However, its subjectivism was not solipsist; rather, it had its share of "universality" in the dualism of the contemporary mind.

These two poems, which alternately present nature as inert and dead under the eye of science, or as self-sufficient and indifferent, both isolate man from his universe. The fact that man's mind is the author of his alienation (by creating in the web of his thoughts the fiction of science, or by the very fact that an evolved, Darwinian human consciousness separates man from the unconscious harmony of nature) makes any resolution doubtful. Yeats' later characteristic poetry operates by involving this circle of human truth in dialogue with systems which are external to his full comprehension, which allure by their suggestion of comprehensiveness and repel by their character of impersonality. He is a traditional poet in that he attempts such dialogue; he is a modern poet in that he speaks from a centre of value which is psychological and because his "philosophy" never gets beyond an epistemology. Traditional in many of his convictions, he is modern in his search for "authority" for them. A search for such authority in the theory of Anima Mundi is not successful in resolving the impasse between a psychological approach to "human truth" and the human desire to understand "objectively." The Anima Mundi understood objectively in the System is but the mirror image of a more traditional Platonic system of transcendental being. The truth about human knowledge is that it is "a property of the dead" not of the living; the living may "embody truth but cannot know it." This human condition which separates wisdom from power, and knowledge from living, is dramatized in various ways in the

poetry. Thought impoverishes action, action impoverishes thought, and the whirling interpenetrating gyres dynamically express the condition of man's existence. The static worlds of isolation presented in the two Shepherd poems are later related by the "dialogue" of gyres. But the gyres are really only descriptions of the original dualism.

Daiches' comment on poems which "reflect the inhumanity of faery or nature" points out the character of each in the poetry. But we might ask outselves why this character was so emphasized by the poet. It is true, of course, that Irish tradition related the land of faery to the human world antithetically: human joy is faery sorrow (as Oisin learns in Island one), human seed time is their harvest time, and so on. And it is true that Yeats sought in this tradition an escape from a sentimental poetry of Nature, seeing nature through a "lens coloured by the self." The image of the lens recalls the "optic lens" of science whose narrow vision produces the Grey Truth which afflicts the imagination. Somewhere between Grey Truth and sentimentality must lie the possibilities for poetry, and the land of faery offered interesting possibilities. Or, to look at it another way, between the world of science which denied the spirit, and the world of Patrick which denied the world, there must be a third position. It is the potential of Faery which could reintroduce both soul and flesh into poetry, <u>not</u> in reconciliation, but at least in dialogue; a dialogue of ironic involvement far superior in potential for poetry than the schism evidenced in Tennyson's "Two Voices."

Very little of this potential is even hinted at in the fairy poems published during the late 1880's. "The Fairy Pedant," "The Fairy Doctor,"

"The Priest and the Fairy," and "A Lover's Quarrel Among Fairies" verge upon the sentimental. Creatures of a literary tradition, they have the puckish humour of A Midsummer Night's Dream or the borrowed details of Allingham's verse. They have an awkward substantiality (which the ballad form perhaps encourages) and they lack the lyric grace and the edge of mystery which "The Stolen Child" and "Song of the Faeries" have. The Faery and Folk Tales (1888) and The Celtic Twilight (1893) evidence amid their charm something of the cold dawn wind which was intended to wither the sentimentalized nature of Wordsworthianism. In these stories, which so carefully avoid the psychological or anthropomorphic "explanations," there is a twilight world of imaginative belief, that is, of a belief with the emotions. In prefaces addressed to the sceptical intellect, Yeats employs the tactic of identifying the fictitious nature of scientific disciplines which presume an authority to explain folklore. There must have been considerable ironic satisfaction in allowing the Socrates of Phaedrus to defend folklore against a too ready rationalism. In the introduction to The Celtic Twilight, Yeats addresses the reader: "The reader will perhaps wonder that in all my notes I have not rationalized a single hobgoblin. I seek shelter in the words of Socrates...."[73] Socrates in this dialogue considers the possibility that folktales are allegories for events better understood in the terms of physical science; but, dismissing the chimerae of the mind as unprofitable for exploration, he addresses attention instead to self-knowledge. Yeats deftly and obliquely fore-

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[73]Yeats, Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry (London: Walter Scott, 1888), p. 2.

stalls a simple rationalist criticism and throws the question of the nature of "truth" of the folk-tales back upon the mystery of the human mind. He knew enough Plato to have known that the Socratic abruptness with the fanciful was no rationalist's attack upon the imaginative, and that Plato's deepest thoughts were voiced in terms of a mythos, not a logos. In Yeats' published introductions and notes he maintained a guarded ambivalent attitude towards the folk tales he had collected, but in private letters he reveals the degree of his belief. He writes to Katherine Tynan:

> All will go well if I keep my own unpopular thoughts out of them. To be mechanical and workmanlike is at present my deepest ambition. I must be careful in no way to suggest that fairies, or something like them, do veritably exist, some flux or flow of spirits between man and the unresolveable mystery.[74]

The "flux or flow" evades rationalistic explanation. Yeats variously considers fairy-lore to be the degeneration of a once-potent imaginative life of the people, or as "moods" which inhabit our consciousness and which we subsequently dramatize in stories, or as "human souls in the crucible."[75] Sometimes the association with the poetic imagination is explicitly made: the Leanhaun Shee is the Fairy Mistress or Muse, "...one of the dreadful solitary fairies. To her have belonged the greatest of the Irish poets, from Oisin down to the last century."[76] La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Helen, Salome--all have an affinity to this

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[74]Quoted by Katherine Tynan in her Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1913), p. 261.

[75]Yeats, Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, p. 2.

[76]Ibid., p. 146.

"dreadful solitary" who demands the sacrifice of the life to the work.

Little of the drama that Yeats felt to be potential in the antithetical worlds of fairy and human finds itself expressed in this early verse. The opposite, however, is true of the sequence of epigrams entitled "Quatrains and Epigrams"[77] which present themes already familiar from The Island of Statues in a polished, finished manner suggesting wisdom. The themes evident again are the sorrow of love, art's superiority over time and change (an Attic bust smiles in rather self-conscious superiority over life's "red lips of dust"), the self-sufficiency of nature in contrast to Man's restlessness. There are also presented the complementary truths: men's lives are flights "from their dread selves"; "wild indolence" is wise beyond Sophocles tragic vision. These verses reflect not only the young poet's ready opinions on art and life, but also the desire for aesthetic control over wayward revery. The quatrain form forces a mechanical neatness of expression, a certain "objectivity" of manner.

It seems probable that these quatrains borrow the form of Sir William Watson's quatrains and are a response to their themes. Watson was a friend and admirer of Edward Dowden; one of his books of verse, that containing the quatrain sequence, was dedicated to Dowden, and it seems likely that Yeats would have read it. In 1890 Yeats stated in a letter that he knew these quatrains "by heart."[78] Interesting enough, Watson's sequence was entitled "Subjectivity in Art" and Watson's

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[77]Verse discussed in this chapter is to be found in the Variorum edition of the poems.

[78]Wade, p. 262.

growing conservatism and concern for moral purposiveness found a sympathetic friend in Dowden. Yeats' first quatrain seems to be a response to Watson and Dowden's plea for an objective purposiveness as a remedy for the subjective problem:

> The child who chases lizards in the grass,
> The sage who deep in central nature delves,
> The preacher watching for the ill hour to pass--
> All these are souls which fly from their dread selves.

The positioning of this quatrain at the beginning of the series (a position maintained in otherwise varied publications) makes it appear likely that this is a deliberate statement on the poetry of moral earnestness which evaded self-knowledge. We can recall J. B. Yeats' estimate of Dowden's poetic moments: they had the "furtive" character of illicit subjectivity.

The range of Yeats' early verse included political satire. His poem "The Two Titans: a Political Poem" of 1886 belongs to the same year as his nationalistic article on Ferguson's poetry. In the piece, a Sybil (a Shelleyan personification of England, in political terms) keeps a youth (Ireland) in chains. The piece is subtitled "a political poem" just as The Island of Statues was subtitled "an Arcadian Fairy Tale," and we need not be surprised if the political poem is concerned with personal and artistic themes. Hopkins, who read the poem in Dublin, called its allegory strained and unworkable. What does perplex a reader is the ambivalent relation between the youth and the Sybil. A simple political allegory would present the chain of coercion as the force which unnaturally binds youth to tyrant. But in this poem the nature of the bond seems pecualiarly personal. "He is her own" suggests

more than political dominance, and the revulsion of close physical contact suggests sexual distaste. The flailing rhetoric of the poem, seeking to excite disgust and loathing for the Sybil, includes strong personal feelings which have only a dubious relation with the political: the somewhat incestuous nature of the union may have resulted from an inadvertent welling up of sexual feeling summoned by the excessively emotional manner of the poem. The style is such as to make it seem doubtful that there is clear thought behind all that excessive emotion, but there is a distinct possibility that Yeats, who saw politics in cultural terms, saw in the youth of the poem his own struggle to emerge from an encompassing English Romantic tradition. The figure of a wasted youth grown prematurely old is very common in Yeats' early verse: it is part literary borrowing (Alastor and Endymion) but it had a real relation to his experience of sacrificing his youth to the pursuit of art. The tyrant Sybil may also be, in Shelleyan terms, the baser self against which all idealism strives. There is a similarity between her as "a withered foe" and the bearded witch, Infamy, of "The Seeker." Both witch and sybil plant a kiss upon the brow of "failure" and both excite revulsion. The heavy, ponderous quality of the Sybil's movements are, again, like that of the demon which Oisin battles, and combat with this shape-changer includes an embrace with a nine-days' corpse. The antagonists seem to have been composites, multiple antagonisms (hence the shape-changing character) which include aspects of Yeats' own character which he abhorred. (Yeats may have been escaping his own "dread" self.) Our concern is not directly with such personal interpretations, but more with the degree to which the personal can be

construed as "subjective" and hence as an aesthetic problem. We have noted the allegory of "The Seeker" as the fate of the subjective quest, that the allegory of the political poem on two titans has cultural, specifically literary, associations, and we will later consider how distinctly the demon in "Oisin" is a literary figure in a specific landscape of art.

Other verses written during the planning and composition of "Oisin" display Yeats' developing narrative skill. "How Ferenz Renyi Kept Silent" published in August of 1887 is openly political as an address to an Hungarian martyr of Austrian oppression, from "the Hungary of the West." Another narrative, "The Phantom Ship" published in May of 1888, is in Longfellow's manner, perhaps written with the readers of The Providence Sunday Journal in mind, for this is its only publication. The Indian poems include the explicitly didactic "Kanva on Himself," a poem which may be considered as directed against the Grey Truth of Western objectivism. Another poem in ballad form published in December of 1888 presents the legend that "a drowned city is supposed to lie under the waters of Lough Gill." Similar to the later play The Hour Glass, the poem is directly satirical of a modern age whose practical disbelief is the death of the imagination and a denial of the "props" which hold up our universe. The Maker of the stars and worlds incarnated in contemporary society is accused by spokesmen of worldly wisdom. A "grey professor" echoes Dowden's criticism of Yeats and A. E.'s interest in theosophy:

> A grey professor passing cried
> 'How few the mind's intemperance rule!
> What shallow thoughts about deep things
> The world grows old and plays the fool'.

A mayor charges "Communist," a bishop "Atheist," and Yeats varying Blake's argument in "Augeries of Innocence" on the self-extinction of a doubting sun or moon, dismisses all in the final conceit:

> The maker of the stars and worlds
> To his own house did him betake
> And on that city dropped a tear
> And now that city is a lake.

We will conclude this chapter with a consideration of "The Madness of King Goll," Yeats' first poem published in an English magazine, The Leisure Hour (September, 1887) and his first use of Irish legend in narrative verse. The selection of this legend and the manner of its presentation illustrates once again that Yeats' persistent theme is poetry and the imaginative life, and that consequently the adoption of a new literary tradition in Irish legend was understood by Yeats to be part of the process of his own poetic development. The finding of a tradition of some objective authority in history and folklore did not simply resolve Yeats' problems of persona; in fact, the legends were employed to act as commentary upon the poet's essential subject matter, the plight of the modern poet's isolation. We can say that under the inspiration of O'Leary, Yeats had a cause, and that in Irish legend he had a tradition, but it seems obvious that the poet could not simply invent a fictional persona to be bard to that tradition. As a romantic, his subject was always personal, and we need not be surprised that the legend he selected and the manner of its treatment favours the elegaic mood, for he is a modern writing about a past age whose heroic spirit can only be recalled, not relived.

"The Madness of King Goll" is a poem about poetry, and a very autobiographical one. It has been drastically revised: the series of

revisions have erased most of the character of the original version which we refer to in our discussion. The "plot" of the legend as it is presented in the poem may be reviewed briefly. A youthful King Goll (his youth the later revisions ignore) begins his reign amid high expectations from attendant druids who hope for an Apollonian era of wise, prosperous government: "He brings the peaceful age of gold." Goll reverts, however, to a primitive, almost elemental world of experience after waging a bloody and successful war upon a "sea-King masterful" who had invaded his Kingdom. After the carnage of battle, with a "fever and a whirling fire" in his mind, Goll runs mad with extravagant longing for the mystery which lies behind the veil of the familiar. At the height of his madness he experiences an ecstatic perception which he seeks to express with a harp found all "songless" and "deserted" by a slumbering town. As he sang his "heart was free," but the singing consumed the vision. The poem ends as a forlorn Goll wanders alone by the sea-shore in the manner of Keats' Knight-at-arms or of Yeats' earlier "The Sad Shepherd." The revisions achieve more narrative simplicity and remove, as we have said, most of the romantic posturing that is so evident in the original. Specifically, there are three changes in content: the youthfulness of Goll which was referred to twice in the original is not mentioned in the revisions; the harp becomes a tympan; the details of Goll's alienation from society and "nature," having only the company of "toads and other outcast things," is omitted in the revisions.

When Yeats, in the previous year, 1886, wrote his article on Ferguson's rendering of Irish legend, he singled out the legend's

character of extravagant longing (a Celtic trait which Yeats seemingly understood in Arnoldian terms as the stubborn assertions of the heart against the tyranny of fact). One passage shows his interest in the freedom for a wide range of emotion which the form of the legend offered:

> Emotions which seem vague or extravagant when expressed under the influence of modern literature cease to be vague or extravagant when associated with ancient legend and mythology, for legend and mythology were born out of man's longing for the mysterious and the infinite.[79]

The legend of King Goll apparently attracted Yeats because it provided the form (as a legend) for his own "vague and extravagant" moods, and because the story imaged forth the problem of a poet of a later age trying to give voice to the turbulent energy of the legend. In Yeats' original version, Goll is a poet-figure who chooses not to reign in a peaceful administration of his inheritance; instead, he answers a call for assistance against an invader. He subsequently finds the harp (an obvious nationalist image) to give voice to a new inspiration. But in the effort he tears the strings of the instrument (like Milton's "oaten pipes"?) and the attempt at epic expression ends as elegaic bereavement, saved from a triteness of mood by the strange energy of the chorus' rhythm. Our concern is with Yeats' use of the legend for an allegorical statement on the modern poet and bardic poetry, and we are not concerned directly with other, autobiographical, associations. There is a familiar situation and image, however, which points out just how personal Yeats' original poem was, personal beyond the poet-figure pose which is our topic. The situation is that of the "outcast" who can commune only

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[79]Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson," Dublin University Review, Nov. 1886, p. 924.

with nature's outcasts, with creatures like toads. When Goll begins to play the harp

> ...toads and every outlawed thing
> In solemn revery rose to hear
> . . . . . .
> The song of outlaws and their fear

Goll is outside the "system" of civilization (especially outside the Victorian system of unalterable law), he knows the terror of his isolation, and he projects his self-pity towards these images of alienation. This passage and this mood might better be described as a "sad soliloquy" which Yeats had condemned in his article on Ferguson in preference for the heroic energy of Ferguson's bardic appeal. That such a passage does appear in the rendering of a legend that was to express opposite, objective and epic qualities, simply illustrates how much the subject is Yeats, not a legendary Goll. The theme of the poet as an "outcast" parallels the real theme of the poem because it is a deliberate expression of the modern poet's isolation, and is one of the first examples of what was to become a common enough persona in later poetry. An exorcism of the obsession is sought in the myth of Dhoya (who has a Muse visitant, and then is left bereft, in sorrowful communion with the outcasts of nature) and in The Speckled Bird, an analytical autobiography which was never finished, but whose title suggests the abiding theme of the outcast.

"The Madness of King Goll," then, employs a legend to image the romantic poet's desire to sing in the voice of a heroic past. But the contemporary romantic, like the Goll of the legend, finds such expression impossible. The poem is a dramatization of this impossibility; even at

this early date Yeats has found that his essential subject matter was the relation of himself to a tradition and his essential mode of expression is the dramatic not the visionary. It is not a poem of vision (as A. E. would probably have rendered it); it is a poem which deliberately attempts to dramatize in the early, characteristically elegaic way the plight of the last romantic. The father's illustration which accompanied the appearance of the poem in The Leisure Hour pictures the bearded W. B. Yeats, his dreaming head bent, in Pre-Raphaelite manner, over the harp whose strings he is tearing out. The dreaming repose of the face combined with the violent actions of the hand quite truly represent the poem's dreamy rendering of a violent legend. The manner, we suggest, is not unfortunate mannerism, a Pre-Raphaelite misunderstanding of the real character of the legend. The topic of poem and picture is not the legend but the modern poet's necessary relation towards the legend. Both poem and picture are conscious of the historical distance between the singer and the legend: that distance, that necessary discrepancy, is the theme both express.[80] This theme is more elaborately presented in "Oisin" where epochs of poetry define the rhythm of history, and where the character of contemporary late romanticism is portrayed in the dreaming revery of the third island which Oisin visits.

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[80]"Since I was a boy I have always longed to hear poems spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his...Images used to rise before me...of wild-eyed men speaking harmoniously to murmuring wires while audiences in many-coloured robes listened, hushed and excited." From "Speaking to the Psaltery," Essays and Introductions, London: MacMillan, 1961, p. 14.

CHAPTER II

THE FIGURE OF EDWARD DOWDEN

We have been emphasizing Yeats' conscientious struggle with the subjectivism which produced a poetry of "sad soliloquy" and have observed something of his dilemma as a late romantic. Before he found "imaginative belief" in what he hoped was a living tradition in Irish mythology and legend (that is, local and immediate, not merely theoretical evidence of the Anima Mundi), his only source for the authority of the imagination was literary. The nearest that one could come to an authoritative religion was in the inspired utterance of great poets. Their literature constituted a tradition. The well of imaginative power was in the subjective life, but unless the imagination could deliver itself from the womb of the mind and relate its "truth" to the pressing "reality" of the outer world it would become inbred, self-reflective, "mirror mirroring mirror," reinacting the introspective journey of an Alastor and finally meeting with that spectral shadow of the true Muse, the "bearded witch, Infamy."

Our emphasis upon Yeats' consciousness of the problem of subjective art may have seemed unduly restrictive. Why should not a young poet develop more simply and naturally, expressing the promptings of natural inspiration without being curbed and checked by theory? We have noted the critical atmosphere in which his natural inspiration had to work. J. B. Yeats condemned the undramatic egoism of introspective verse.

In addition, the tradition of writing poems about poetry made any approach to a theme sophisticated rather than simple. Among the Romantics, poetry was often a recognized parable about the imaginative process, and among the Pre-Raphaelites a frequent topic of poetry was the art of the Romantics, especially Keats. What we have yet to consider in more detail is the pressure of the "Victorian poetry of ideas" which complicated further any simple expression of natural inspiration, by throwing the young Yeats back upon the subjective life whose values, he intuited, were those from which great literature grew. The need for a theme other than what had become a literary commonplace, the subjective self's search for a theme, the need for an audience, for a "poetry of the people," generally for an objective tradition beyond private inspiration to which he could relate his imaginative life, was insistent. But the solution adopted by a "poetry of ideas" which readily found a popular audience and a tradition of sorts in its relevance to contemporary "opinion" was, to Yeats, a betrayal of literature. The landscape of art in Victorian times was a desert of abstraction and newspaper opinion for the young poet, and his response was to seek out refuges for the imagination, sea-engirt islands, Arcadias, any oasis in that parched landscape. Such islands provided conditions for exotic and, later, occult growths. Yeats in 1885 had found in fellow students allies in reaction to a sceptical age. George Russell and Charles Johnston, among others, responded quickly to the occult lore proffered by Sinnett's books, The Occult World and Esoteric Buddhism. Their enthusiasm which Yeats (in a more circumspect manner) shared was a measure of their rejection of the prevailing scientific

temper of the times. As Yeats observes in the Autobiographies, a reaction had set in: "Certainly those minds, parched by many examinations, were thirsty."[1] Yeats' objections to much of contemporary literature was doctrinaire and violent, the overly asserted denunciation of a youth who was uncertain of his own authority to challenge its philosophic and ethical premises. Much of the manner of his attacks upon an apostate literature was, of course, borrowed from his father. But the sheer weight of the Grey Truth of scientific "objectivity" and the mass of literature which supported it was not to be dispatched with a little defensive rhetoric. It was a continuing influence during the 1880's in shaping the direction of his poetic development.

The myth of a progressive, all-assimilating literature which followed the march of science was the theme of the family acquaintance, the critic Edward Dowden. As a critic of nineteenth century literature (English, French, German, but never Irish), Dowden was a theorist and a champion of its progress. The young Yeats could not match his erudition, but he was no stranger to theories, nor to mythic or prophetic responses to "reasonable" interpretations of literature's character and development. Several of his unpublished satirical poems written in the late 1880's evidence his response to the viewpoint which Dowden personified. More importantly, the general myth of the progress of literature prompted Yeats into writing a counter-myth in "Oisin."

Dowden, born in Cork in 1843, had little attachment for the "provinciality" of that city, and an attitude ranging from condescension to contempt for smaller Irish towns. In this he differed from fellow

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[1] Auto., p. 91.

Anglo-Irish men of letters such as Allingham, and contrasted strongly to Yeats who held a passionate attachment for Sligo. Dowden's cosmopolitanism in literature reflected his general attitude towards the provincial hinterland that lay westward beyond Trinity College in Dublin. A letter of 1874 on the subject of Irish folklore expresses his characteristic feelings.

> The town of Youghal, though, as Irish towns go, not of the worst, not as bad as Bandon, or Drogheda or Sligo, is hardly a pleasant place to go after Shenanagh...I feel no romantic attachment to the South, or even any homesickness for it. But I feel a kindly affection for it such as one has towards an old nurse that sang songs (not of the highest kind but musical) for one, and told stories (not very wonderful ones, but good enough for children who are not critical).[2]

In 1867 he had been appointed professor of English at Trinity College. His literary friends included Ferguson, Aubrey de Vere, and Todhunter, but he showed little sympathy for their writing when they experimented with the provincial backwaters of Irish legend. O'Grady was preparing his History of Ireland (published between 1878 and 1880, Ferguson had published Congal (1872) while Dowden prepared and presented his study on Shakespeare (1874) which brought him some international reputation. It was this work of criticism that Yeats felt was full of moral utilitarianism. Dowden, Yeats observed, made Shakespeare into a "British Benthamite." Referring in a letter to Quinn on his own Shakespeare essay in Ideas of Good and Evil, Yeats wrote, "I think the best of these essays is that on Shakespeare. It is a family exasperation

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[2]E. D. West ed., Fragments From Old Letters: E. D. to E. D. West 1869-1892 (London: Dent and Sons, 1914), p. 107.

with the Dowden point of view, which rather filled Dublin in my youth."[3] Dowden in an official silence ignored contemporary works on Irish mythology which were to be the basis for Yeats' inspiration. In private, he was active in attempting to persuade both de Vere and Todhunter to work within the larger English tradition. To de Vere, who was considering a long heroic poem on a Celtic legend, Dowden counselled "...do not let so great a subject as Thomas à Becket slip for the sake of any Irish Heroic subject...the choice of an Irish mythical, or early historical, subject confines the full enjoyment of the poem to a little circle."[4] Familiar advice, which was expressed also in all probability to Todhunter (whom the young Yeats had aggressively advised to forget "the great public" and to write "for a little clan").[5] Aubrey de Vere subsequently wrote on an Irish myth and Dowden gave a qualified approval for the poem "The Foray of Queen Maeve": "I am infinitely glad that I spent all my early enthusiasms on Wordsworth and Spenser and Shakespeare, and not on anything that Ireland has produced...," but "...You have made me feel things either in the story, or that you have breathed into it, which I did not feel before."[6]

Dowden's refusal to participate in a celebration of Thomas Moore's centenary in 1879 might well have been for political, not aesthetic reasons (Moore would seem to be of as much literary importance as some

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[3]Wade, p. 88.

[4]Elizabeth and Hilda Dowden, eds., Letters of Edward Dowden and His Correspondents (London: Dent and Sons, 1914), p. 68. Dated Aug. 22, 1874.

[5]Auto., p. 120.

[6]Letters of Edward Dowden..., p. 183. Dated Sept. 13, 1882.

of the lesser Elizabethans whose verse Dowden's scholarship was then exploring). Certainly the cultural ideal of "cosmopolitanism" as distinct from "provincialism" depended upon rather specific political associations. In a letter of May 14, 1886 a gentleman's interest in politics is displayed:

> It is true, politics don't penetrate to my individual centres of life--but I can throw myself into a side which seems the right one...I take considerable interest in the maintenance of the Union, for I feel that our moral and intellectual isolation and provinciality would be increased by its repeal.[7]

By 1887 political sympathies, which seemed to have influenced his interests in literature earlier, now found public outlet in the organization of an Irish Liberal Unionist Patriotic meeting in 1887.[8] This is the period when Yeats, as a disciple of O'Leary, was writing "Oisin." By 1893 Dowden writes, "All my days and hours now go into Unionist work."[9]

Yeats in the early years of the nineties fought for literary ideals which drew political fire from both sides in an increasingly polarized political scene. Unionist friends saw subversive, often open politics in the Irish literary movement where "young Ireland" valued literature just in so far as it advanced a patriotic "cause." Yeats' involvement in politics was indirect and his literary aims hopefully transcended political parties. However, his very idealism recognized an absolute distinction between the character and tactics of O'Leary

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[7] Fragments From Old Letters..., p. 181.

[8] Letters of Edward Dowden..., p. 228.

[9] Ibid., p. 261.

and Dowden. O'Leary to Yeats' mind seemed to combine a dedication to principles which enlarged, not narrowed, his respect for "personality," and he seemed to fight his battle with a morality which transcended patriotism ("There are things that a man must not do to save a nation"[10]). Dowden, on the other hand, who had all the advantages of the establishment and had an international reputation as a critic, seemed "to fight unfairly."[11] It is with the memory of bitter youthful indignation that Yeats recalls his supercilious scorn for the Irish literary movement: "...in Dublin Professor Dowden, the one man of letters with an international influence, was accustomed to say that he knew an Irish book by its smell, because he had once seen some books whose bindings had been fastened together with rotten glue."[12] This scorn was not simply attributable to the increased political animosity of the early 1890's. It was an accustomed attitude shared by Dowden's compatriot men of letters which made ignorance of things Irish a virtue, as this brisk letter of Dowden to a colleague, in 1882, admirably illustrates: "Dear Dr. Ingram--Jenkinson asked Tyrell for names of some good books on Ireland since 1798, and T asked me, and I ask you."[13]

In 1915, when Yeats was preparing his first section of Autobiographies, "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth," there were numerous letters exchanged with his father, many of them on the subject of Dowden. J. B. Yeats was concerned about the intended presentation. Excerpts from two

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[10] Auto., p. 96.

[11] Wade, p. 606.

[12] Auto., p. 200.

[13] Letters of Edward Dowden..., p. 182.

of his son's letters follow:

> ...my chapter on Dowden, it is the only chapter which is a little harsh...I couldn't leave Dowden out, for, in a subconscious way, the book is a history of a revolt, which perhaps unconsciously you taught me, against certain Victorian ideals. Dowden is an image of those ideals and has to stand for the whole structure in Dublin, Lord Chancellor and all the rest.[14]

and

> I don't think you will very much object to what I have said of Dowden, it is not hostile, it is merely a little unsympathetic. It is difficult for me to write of him otherwise; at the start of my movement in Dublin he was its most serious opponent, and fought it in ways that seemed unfair. He was charming in private but what he said in private had no effect upon his public word. I make no allusions to these things but of course they affect my attitude; he was helpful and friendly when I first began to write and I give him credit for it. But in my account of Dublin I had to picture him as a little unreal, set up for contrast beside the real image of O'Leary.[15]

The Dowden presented in the Autobiographies was a little "unreal" as a personal portrait, but as a personification of principles and attitudes he was not a fictional counter for the "real" image of O'Leary. The shaping, interpretive character of the Autobiographies required some simplification: distinctions were presented dramatically as contrasts, and the flux of issues was clarified by polarizing them in the characters of the two men. However, we can assume that the younger Yeats experienced issues quite dramatically and that the struggle to launch a new literary movement made Dowden a real antagonist. We do not know how much restraint Yeats exercised in modifying or omitting material in

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[14]Wade, pp. 602-603.

[15]Wade, p. 606.

deference to Dowden's family, and in response to his father's letters. The father counselled in one letter "...avoid giving pain even to your Dublin enemies,"[16] and he cautioned in another, "I know of old that from the time of your boyhood you have been liable, only at times, to a touch of the propaganda fiend--you get it from your father."[17]

Whatever other attacks made or planned in satirical verse the father may have had in mind, he would certainly have remembered the broadside delivered at Dowden and the Trinity College establishment in his son's article on the poetry of Ferguson published in the Dublin University Review in October of 1886.

> It is a question whether the most distinguished of our critics, Professor Dowden, would not only have more consulted the interests of his country, but more also, in the long run, his own dignity and reputation, which are dear to all Irishmen, if he had devoted some of those elaborate pages which he has spent on the much be-written George Eliot, to a man like the subject of this article...[18]

Yeats' estimate of Dowden as a critic was formed years before this outburst which was precipitated by his enthusiasm for a new cause. In late 1880 the Yeats family moved from London to Dublin, and the young Yeats came into close contact with the critic. We can summarize from the Autobiographies Yeats' account of his experience:

> From our first arrival in Dublin, my father brought me from time to time to see Edward Dowden...for perhaps a couple of years he was the image of romance ...I was chilled, however, when he explained that he had lost his liking for Shelley and would not have written it [i.e. the biography] but for an old

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[16] J. B. Yeats, Letters..., p. 169.

[17] Ibid., p. 168.

[18] "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson," p. 924.

> promise to the Shelley family...Though my faith was shaken, it was only when he urged me to read George Eliot that I became angry and disillusioned and worked myself into a quarrel or half quarrel. I had read all Victor Hugo's romances and a couple of Balzac's and was in no mood to like her.[19]

The association of young poet and established critic was not limited to visits to the latter's home. From Dowden's letters during the years 1881-82, we know that he spent considerable time in Yeats' studio and that their conversations on art and literature were either shared by Willie Yeats, or related, probably in J. B. Yeats' dramatic manner, to his son on the daily train ride back to Howth. In letters to Todhunter, Dowden writes of the protracted sittings for a portrait by Years. In May of 1881, "His portrait of me, like the original, is growing old. It is now in its second year."[20] By December of the same year he refers to "the hell of Yeats' studio."[21] J. B. Yeats' familiar criticism of Dowden's rising reputation as a critic at the expense of a poetic talent is evident in the mixed flattery recorded in another letter, "As to my 'Crake'--Yeats says I wrote it furtively, and that all my poems have a furtive look, as if I were ashamed to confess myself a poet. That seems to me a good criticism. Ought I to join the profession of Poets?"[22]

There is no record of the lengthy debates on literature which must have formed a substantial part of the conversations both in Yeats'

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[19] Auto., pp. 85-87. My brackets.

[20] Letters of Edward Dowden..., p. 172.

[21] Ibid., p. 178.

[22] Ibid., p. 187.

studio and at Dowden's home, conversations in which the young poet would sometimes participate. Because they were important in the formation of Yeats' theories about literature and defined to some extent the direction of his poetry, we can attempt to construct their general character from the letters of J. B. Yeats and Dowden which express literary opinions, and from the published criticism of Dowden. We will review, in particular, the philosophy expressed in Dowden's Studies in Literature and its evaluation of nineteenth century poets.

The critical basis for Dowden's estimate of various poets considered in his Studies in Literature[23] is presented in the first chapter of that book, "The Scientific Movement and Literature." Dowden's main theme is that science has become the central cultural influence upon nineteenth century consciousness and no literature which avoids the tenor of its enquiry or its philosophic implications raised by its discoveries can hope to be either relevant to the spirit of the age or a literature which could survive. It is literature's function to bring science into the household of man's more familiar culture: "...the imagination by its unifying power can bring together the apparently antagonistic elements--the seeming testimony of the senses, and its correction by the intellect--and can make both subservient to the heart."[24] The spirit of Wordsworth's hopefulness (expressed in the Preface of 1802) is an acknowledged inspiration for Dowden's continued confidence in reconciliation. Tennyson's poetry is singled out for its

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[23]Edward Dowden, Studies in Literature: 1789-1877 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 5th ed., 1889).

[24]Studies in Literature: 1789-1877, p. 91.

happy assimilation of science's facts into eminent poetry. Dowden argues for an imaginative participation in scientific concepts which should impress the spirit of Man: "First the vastness of the universe, and of the agencies at work in it; secondly the idea of law; thirdly the idea of 'ensemble'; last, the ultimate of known ultimates...force."[25] Such abstractions, he proposed, should fortify the spirit of man, "This conception of the reign of law...[can]...sustain the heart...and we shall more and more find occasion for joy and triumph."[26] The triumph is assured by the impulsive necessity of history's "hereditary laws" (which are somehow not "deterministic"; necessity and the broadening freedom of Man are compatible under the umbrella term "progress"). "But the stream of tendency descends to us with imperious force from remote regions, it advances broadening into the future."[27] Thus, "The idea of human progress...has become a great inspiring force in literature."[28]

The broad, liberal spirit in which Dowden persuasively advocated a joyful compatibility between literature and science might only have been philosophically offensive to one of Yeats' opposite persuasion. However, the charming reasonable tone is dropped when he pauses in his grand review of necessary progress to comment upon anachronistic literature of the otherwise progressive times. One regressive current in the literary wave of the future is the Pre-Raphaelite "poetry of

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[25] Ibid., p. 93.

[26] Ibid., p. 99. My brackets.

[27] Ibid., p. 110.

[28] Ibid., p. 111.

sentimental mediaevalism" which is "in retreat or recoil from our time."[29] Scattered passages can be assembled to give the logic of Dowden's denunciation. Men are born Ptolemaists, they must mature into Copernicans; that is, the "seeming testimony of the senses" must stand "correction by the intellect."[30] Modern mediaevalists are cases of arrested development. The Ptolemaic system, once poetically useful, must now be seen as a "toy." In a hopeless search for authority to shore up the ruins of an outdated homocentric emphasis, such "mediaevalists" take to astrology. Dowden quotes the rationalist historian Lecky on this aberration, "The study of astrology...may be regarded as one of the last struggles of human egoism against the depressing sense of insignificance which the immensity of the universe must produce." And Dowden adds his censure, "If man be made the measure of the universe, the universe becomes a parish in which all the occupants are interested in each petty scandal. Who would not choose to be a citizen of a nobly-ordered commonwealth rather than lord of a petty clan."[31]

We will consider Dowden's assessment of particular poets and novelists, for example, Victor Hugo, George Eliot, Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth for it seems that Dowden's evaluation is very often the

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[29] Ibid., p. 109.

[30] Ibid., p. 91.

[31] Ibid., p. 98. It is interesting to read Lecky's view of the Byzantine Empire and to speculate whether Yeats' acquaintance with it confirmed a contrary prejudice: "...the universal verdict of history is that it constitutes with scarcely an exception the most thoroughly vicious form that civilization has assumed." Quoted by D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher in their article "Byzantium" in Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Unterecker (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963), p. 132.

measure of Yeats' opposite response: Dowden's oppositions created literary heroes for the young Yeats and these literary heroes became the inspiration for "Oisin," which can best be understood as a counter-myth to that critic's philosophy of literature. In this sense Dowden was an important influence on Yeats for he was instrumental in hardening certain lines of thought which were to direct his poetic development. For example, the myth best suited to counter Dowden's popular march of progress was a myth of cyclical history which could serve both to deflate the ego of progressivism by defining contemporary history as a dwindling "stock run dry," and could satisfy Yeats' youthful aspirations for a revolutionary return to a vigorous heroic literature. In occultism and theosophy Yeats would find patterns of correspondences and theories of the cyclical nature of history which were adaptable for his polemical purposes. Again, Dowden's explicit derogation of the puerility of poets who assert "the seeming testimony of the senses" and who will not stand a "correction" by the intellect would have been most repugnant to the youthful poet. His reaction to a condescending and presumptuously parental guidance would understandably be a dogmatic assertion of the testimony of the senses over against the "fictions" of the intellect. We can recall his remark (presented in the Autobiographies as the gauche assertiveness of uncertain youth) to a teacher in Dowden's house: formal schooling, announced the youthful Yeats, does not strengthen the will--it merely weakens desire.[32] He also glamourized the romantic tendencies in Arnold's evaluation of Celticism, associating himself with the Celtic assertion of "human truth" against the "tyranny of fact" which

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[32] Auto., p. 93.

meant, specifically, the "facts" which nineteenth-century science grimly proposed. Yeats' early passion for unity of being derives from the schism where "truth" is hopelessly divided into two kinds, one psychological and personal, the other scientific and objective. The extremity of this division into categories which had no possible reconciliation was one result of reacting absolutely to scientism. We might also consider how much glamour was bequeathed to the occult by Dowden's urbane dismissal of it, and how Yeats' search for "allies" for his secret thoughts was thus encouraged into deliberately eccentric systems, which defied, metaphorically, the Copernican objectivity. His rejection of Dowden's myth was, as we have said, emotional: he affirmed the "reasonableness" of Dowden's position only to reject it as insufficient. The bleak gospel of rationalism was not contradicted by a more encompassing truth or system. Yeats was not a visionary poet like George Russell, and he never successfully transcended his own scepticism which was part of his inheritance. However, he transmuted a hopeless dichotomy into dramatic opposition, and the terms of opposition were defined for him very early in his career.

Apart from satiric verse such as "The Legend" and the complex counter-myth which will later be illustrated as the inspiration of "Oisin," there is other evidence that the verse of the 1880's engaged in a rebuttal of Dowden's theories. The reading of Dowden's Studies in Literature, possibly a study of its arguments in preparing himself for those long conversations in his studio or at Dowden's home, preserved in Yeats' memory those images or references towards which he felt disagreement or antagonism. Some examples can be given. Dowden's

enthusiastic description of the vastness of science's universe which should enliven the poetic imagination presented the "stupendous whirl" of stellar motion for reverential contemplation. The word "whirl" is elsewhere used by Dowden to describe an adventurous widening of man's consciousness. The term appears in Yeats' poetry and critical prose to suggest blind or indifferent force, or threatening chaos (ultimately it becomes the widening gyre of Copernican objectivity). In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" the "whirling ways of stars" followed by the "optic glass" of science are dead to "human truth" which, antithetically, is presented in the subjective whorls of a sea shell. The term appears in a Bookman review of 1893 with the same specific meaning: "But we live in a world of whirling change, where nothing becomes old and sacred...."[33] It is a central image of one of Sir William Watson's quatrains which Yeats quoted appreciatively in a letter to Katherine Tynan,[34]

> In mid whirl of the dance of Time ye start,
> Start at the cold touch of Eternity
> And cast your cloak about you and depart.
> The minstrels pause not in their minstrelsy.

It is the significant image presenting the opposition of two kinds of truth: "...we have turned the table of values upside down, and we believe that the root of reality is not in the centre but somewhere in that swirling circumference."[35] In his Studies in Literature Dowden had advocated a responsible pride in the progress of thought: the childlike

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[33]"Old Gaelic Love Songs," The Bookman (Oct. 1893), pp. 19-20.

[34]Wade, p. 262.

[35]"Samhain, 1904," Explorations, p. 149.

human truth of the Ptolemaic system (which stands metaphorically for all egocentric systems) must in modern times, be regarded as a "toy." Yeats, in the happy shepherd poem, reverses the application of the image: science's "Grey truth" is now a "painted toy." Dowden's scorn of petty astrological pursuits in preference to grand astronomical adventures rhetorically asked, "Who would not choose to be citizens of a nobly-ordered commonwealth rather than lord of a petty clan?" We have already referred to Yeats' response in a context which rejects the popular literature of such a cosmopolitan "commonwealth." In the Autobiographies he writes, "Since I was seventeen I had constantly tested my own ambitions with Keats' praise of him who left 'great verse unto a little clan'...," and we cannot doubt that he was quoting aesthetic scripture in rebuttal to Dowden when he presented Todhunter, Dowden's friend, with this quotation from Keats, and advised him to forget Dowden's urging for a cosmopolitan literature and to persuade him "that we had nothing to do with the great public."[36] In response to Dowden's scientific-religious objectivity which censured the philosophy (or more correctly, the childlike instinctiveness) that man is "the measure of the universe" we have the seventeen year old Yeats' counter affirmation asserted as a "dogma": the voice of the poetic imagination speaks out of the depths of man's being, "I had even created a dogma: 'Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct in man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths to be speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.'"[37]

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[36] Auto., p. 120.

[37] Auto., p. 116.

The youthful Yeats who was fond of quoting Rossetti's remark asserting the autonomy of art from irrelevant "points of view" (who cares whether the sun goes around the earth or vice-versa) did so to release art from the bondage of scientific times. In actual fact, Yeats was a stubborn Ptolemaist and his development of the theory of Anima Mundi was not simply a defensive tactic.

If we compare the hierarchy of poets in Dowden's appraisal of the nineteenth century, expressed in published criticism and in letters, with that of Yeats we find a similar pattern of opposition. This is to be expected in a young poet who was "in all things pre-Raphaelite," but we suggest that Dowden's appraisal not only confirmed Yeats' opposite prejudices but also encourages a romantic reaction in that outcasts from Dowden's pantheon of truly great poets became heroes for Yeats. At the root of the different estimations of poets was the different approach to the character of Art in general: a basically psychological evaluation is opposed to a primarily moral evaluation. An early letter of J. B. Yeats to Dowden in 1869 states the antithesis with clarity:

> Art has to do with the sustaining and invigorating of the Personality. To be strong is to be happy. Art by expressing our feelings makes us strong and therefore happy...(I do not mean excitement). In the completely emotional man the least awakening of feeling is a harmony, in which every chord of every feeling vibrates ...With you intellect is the first thing and last in education. With us...emotion is the first thing and last.[38]

Dowden's mature respect for the intellect allowed his Muse only a brief, and, as J. B. Yeats asserted, a "fugitive" visitation. Nearly all of

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[38]J. B. Yeats, Letters..., p. 48.

his poetry was written by early 1870's and it is characterized by brief indulgences in emotions followed by the "corrective" of moral Wordsworthian sentiment. A letter of 1874 presents his view of his progression into maturer verse, "You know I have had, until some years ago, too great a tendency to sink down upon the sensuous and ally my Wordsworthianism with Keats; since then it has tended to ally itself with Shelley; and I believe the change is a progress of a very real kind."[39] Keats was logically the first poet to be sacrificed to the critical canons of "Wordsworthianism." He lacked a moral perspective and compared unfavourably with Milton and Browning who found something permanent beyond the senses. Keats' sonnet "When I have fears..." is used by Dowden to illustrate the basic poverty of Keats' reliance upon the sensuous. The sonnet's conclusion

> ...then on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone and think
> Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink

expresses "the utter collapse and blind vacuity of such a reliance."[40] In another letter Keats' contemporary significance is minimized: he survives, says Dowden, in "one small Rossetti school" which practises a poetry of "wearing moods."[41]

The Shelleyan "stage" in the progress towards Wordsworthianism is reflected in Dowden's biography of Shelley. Parts of the manuscript had been read to Yeats sometime before its publication in 1886, and we can recall how the young poet was "chilled" by learning that the

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[39] Fragments of Old Letters..., p. 110.

[40] Ibid., p. 79. Dated Nov. 15, 1873.

[41] Ibid., p. 129. Dated Apr. 4, 1875.

biography had become a duty not a labour of love. The biography, Yeats felt, attempted to disguise a lack of sympathy by eschewing a moral tone, but the essentially moral criticism is evident in Dowden's letters (many of these letters prompted by Arnold's review of his book). Shelley was "a type of emotional temperament, who, instead of training and steadying himself by facts and life, with all their lessons, checks, and controls, seeks steadiness in a philosophy of abstract doctrines..."[42] Elsewhere in other letters Dowden recognizes Godwin, not Plato, as the doctrinal master. Shelley is "Godwin with a larger heart added" but "I cannot even yet see that he added to the creed, which he accepted almost en bloc."[43] Shelley's visionary moments in Prometheus Unbound, which Yeats in 1884 or 1885 had pointed out to Dowden as suggestive of something surpassing Godwinian optimism, were never recognized by Dowden to be anything more than "Godwin's 'Benevolence' quickened by Shelley's ardour."[44] Shelley was to be understood within the definition of a system which the critic could readily define.

Dowden's letters evidence the moral bias which lay behind the published evaluations of poets. There was a natural tendency to relate literature's worth to its social utility:

> ...there are two great divisions of poets at the present day--those who despair, some of the individual, some both of individual and society--and those who hope. Whitman, Hugo, and Browning each in his way has saved himself and is a poet of hope. George Eliot saves herself and is strong and sad...Morris, abandoning all moral and scientific questions in despair, gazes

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[42] Ibid., p. 185. Dated Jan. 24, 1887.

[43] Letters of Edward Dowden..., p. 260. Dated Jan. 25, 1892.

[44] Ibid., p. 240. Dated Sept. 18, 1889.

> at life with aesthetic interest in the rise and fall of the flame of passion. Swinburne despairs of the individual and enthusiastically hopes for the race...[45]

Such groupings upon an essentially moral basis apparently encouraged Dowden to attempt estimates of poets with whose essential genius he was not temperamentally sympathetic. His estimate of Whitman was generally shared by J. B. Yeats, but his appreciation of Hugo was considered deficient.

> Mr. Yeats, in true fraternity, wrote me a very unfavourable opinion of my V. Hugo paper, which renewed the sense I had that V. Hugo is not a spirit naturally akin to me, and that my adjustment was only temporary and partly factitious, or at least self-surrender...[46]

The paper on Hugo was later read by W. B. Yeats in Dowden's Studies in Literature where its deficiencies in appreciation were highlighted by its proximity to the largely enthusiastic chapter on George Eliot. One can readily sense how Yeats who valued "dramatic utterance" and the expression of "personality" would react to this criticism of Hugo's uncomplicated simplicity: "His transit from doubt to certainty is made instantaneously and through no intervening region of probabilities";[47] or warm to assurances such as, "In the region of conscience and the moral will Victor Hugo is essentially sound and sane";[48] or, respond to admonitions like, "Victor Hugo's art contributes little to the

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[45] Fragments of Old Letters..., pp. 77-78. Dated Nov. 2, 1873.

[46] Ibid., p. 71. Dated July 13, 1873.

[47] Studies in Literature, p. 429.

[48] Ibid., p. 433.

formation of a wise adult conscience."[49] Hugo, for Dowden, lacked Browning's athletic thinking and his patient inquiry into truth, lacked Wordsworth's sober steadiness, and George Eliot's wisdom. He was a romantic much like Shelley, "the seer, the dreamer, the prophet." He had never developed as Wordsworth had, to experience the "Real trial of the intellect, the sad careful conduct of the understanding through the loss of early faith to the mature convictions or surmises of manhood..."[50] Hugo's Légende des Siècles, an "imaginative record of the crimes and the overthrow of tyrants," presented an extravagantly simplified antagonism. Dowden's cosmopolitanism even chastised the limiting nature of Hugo's patriotism: "The extravagance of his love and devotion to France, the extravagance of his scorn and hatred of the invader, must be pardoned...When shall the poet arise...who shall be judicial and yet the greatest of lovers...?"[51] The very term "extravagance" was used by Yeats to describe a generosity of mind and the intensity and energy esteemed by his aesthetic.

The measure and norm for Dowden's evaluation of poets was Wordsworth, and his esteem for the moral relevancy of "Wordsworthianism" was evident long before he began planning a critical edition of the poet. Dowden's own Poems,[52] published in 1876, display the influence. In many of the poems of communion with nature we have Tennysonian questions posed and the transcendental "higher law" of modified

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[49] Ibid., p. 434.

[50] Ibid., p. 430.

[51] Ibid., p. 466.

[52] Edward Dowden, Poems (London: Henry King and Co., 1876).

Wordsworth responding as answer. The landscapes of the poetry are moral. A typical poem, "On the Heights," expresses noble communion with the "embracing solitude" in which "the needs of manhood" are satisfied. Below the heights is the "perilous sea" of doubts, "Of Nature mocking man," but the superior perspective offered by the heights permits the rejection of all the less manly reactions to seas of doubt, all misguided shallower hopes ("frauds of the unfulfilled heart"), among which are "The lurid, the curious, and the occult." We have already referred to the Wordsworthianism by which Dowden assessed his advance through Keats and Shelley. We have noted that the inspiration behind the introductory chapter to Studies in Literature, "Science and Literature," was Wordsworth's 1802 Preface. From letters we have strong testimonials of the precedence of the poet, "No poet has been, nor ever can be, to me quite what Wordsworth has been, for during many years I was lost in him. It was Shakespeare who made me a citizen of the world: but all my vows...were heard by Wordsworth."[53] As Dowden grew older and more consciously conservative, he was attracted still more to the "sober colouring" of Wordsworth. The critic who could offer Yeats George Eliot as a corrective to the young man's addiction for Shelley must have frequently offered Wordsworth as a model to emulate. Dowden's advocacy could only have sharpened Yeats' sense of opposite values. We need go further than Hallam's essay on Tennyson with its analysis of the two voices of poetry, the moral, reflective Wordsworthian and the aesthetic Keatsian and Shelleyan, to know Yeats' preference. And if the tendencies in Wordsworth's poetry were suspect, they were unhappily substantiated

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[53] Letters of Edward Dowden..., p. 250. Dated Oct. 3, 1890.

in the Wordsworthian verse of contemporary popularity. For Yeats, the Wordsworthian landscape of art was a nature sentimentally rendered for moral, utilitarian ends. Wordsworthianism betrayed either an empty didacticism or a subjectivity of mere egoism, and Yeats, who sought a poetic voice between the extremes of public rhetoric and soliloquy, found the worst of both in such verse. The Wordsworthian "finds his image in every lake or puddle" writes Yeats in 1889. "He has to burden the skylark with his cares...He is always a lens coloured by self."[54] As late as 1915 his objections to Wordsworth's poetry itself, not simply its imitators, evidences how thoroughly his appreciation was affected by Dowden's espousal of the poet. In a letter to his father, Yeats writes

> I have just started to read through the whole seven volumes of Wordsworth in Dowden's edition...Have you any impressions of him? He strikes me as always destroying his poetic experience, which of course was of incomparable value, by his reflective power. His intellect was commonplace and unfortunately he has been taught to respect nothing else. He thinks of his poetical experience not as incomparable in itself but as an engine to be yoked to intellect. He is full of a sort of utilitarianism...[55]

The phrasing of the criticism is familiar. In these terms J. B. Yeats criticized the poetry of Dowden, and in these terms W. B. Yeats criticized Dowden's "exasperating" book on Shakespeare which presented him as a "British Benthamite." Behind Yeats' attitude is the long tradition of criticism which had pointed out much that was aesthetically false in Wordsworth's poetry. Landor, an early literary hero of Yeats,

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[54]"The Children of Lir," reprinted in Letters to the New Island, p. 190.

[55]Wade, p. 590.

had ridiculed Wordsworth's prosaic moments in "Southey and Porson," one of his Imaginary Conversations. Keats' letters, especially that to Reynolds in February of 1818 singled out the egoism and didacticism that frequently obtruded upon the poetry. Shelley's prefatory note to "Alastor" was well known, as also was Hallam's essay on Tennyson which considered the character of Wordsworth's kind of poetry at some length. Among contemporaries, George Russell shared Yeats' respect for Arnold, and recognized that Arnold's essay on Wordsworth in 1879 (later included in the second series of his Essays in Criticism) was an attack on "those misguided Wordsworthians who seek to glorify their master by claiming him an 'ethical system as distinctive and capable of expression as Bishop Butlers...'"[56]

Wordsworthianism summed up the whole myth of moral progressiveness in literature, a myth that was insistent in Yeats' early years and against which he had to make headway. We have suggested that Dowden epitomized for Yeats the establishment of Wordsworthianism and that Yeats' early poems such as the two shepherd poems were a deliberate denial of Wordsworthian nature. We have suggested also that "Oisin" expresses attitudes towards nature and individual development which can be considered as a counter-myth to the celebrated and sentimentally misunderstood three ages of man. The sentimentality of Wordsworthianism lay in the pretended reconciliation between values and facts: values were an emotional indulgence in a world where undisputed facts of the physical sciences are quite indifferent. Such sentimentality was as often the result of high seriousness as emotional indulgence.

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[56]George Russell, Mathew Arnold (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1904), p. 22.

To illustrate how insistent was the theory and practice of Wordsworthian sentiment upon Yeats' consciousness during his first decade of writing, we can refer again to the career of Sir William Watson. We have already noted Yeats' familiarity with certain poems of this good friend of Dowden, and have suggested that Yeats' "Quatrains and Aphorisms" were a response to Watson's quatrains which advocated a Wordsworthian solution to the problem of subjectivity in contemporary poetry. Watson, who joined the Rhymers Club but never came, was an established minor poet by 1890. In that year Yeats reviewed his latest book of poems, Wordsworth's Grave and Other Poems.[57] He had judicious praise for the author's mind ("refined, enquiring, subtle") but characterized the poetry as derivative, and as reflecting the age's grey decline into abstract speculation. Yeats knew Watson's work earlier, and knew also the close agreement between this poet and Dowden in their shared Wordsworthianism. If he could not have anticipated the probability that Watson would write an ode "On Wordsworth's Grave" he would have appreciated the ironic aptness of that theme and title. The long friendship between Watson and Dowden encouraged exchanges of letters and of dedicatory poems (which poems Yeats would have read in print) which expressed a conscious sense of Watson's progress as a Wordsworthian.

Watson's development in poetry may be said to be fairly described by an editor of a collected edition of his poems, who shared Watson's sense of maturing wisdom. The inspiration of the early poems, says the editor, is "romantic and aesthetic exclusively; it touches neither

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[57]Yeats' review, entitled "A Scholar Poet," appeared in the New Providence Journal of June 15, 1890. It is reprinted in Letters to the New Island.

the ethical, the intellectual, nor the practical region at any point... His subsequent devotion is to an austerer mode which deliberately rejects all conceits, which lays its stress on the ethical and intellectual, and searches perpetually for more condensed and sculpturesque forms of expression."[58] Watson's first book of verse The Prince's Quest (1880) contains a long narrative poem of the same title in which a dream enchants the hero (like Endymion, or Alastor) and haunts him with desire for fulfillment. The plot takes the hero on voyages to various islands of dream and the subjective problem is the underlying dilemma of the poem. The youthful prince grows old and grey in his pursuit as life is sacrificed for the dream. However, like Adam, he awakens to find fulfillment. Among the scores of narrative poems written in the manner of Endymion this is one which Yeats may have read. One can recall, though, Yeats' admitted delight with Morris' prose romance, "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," which has the myth of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" behind it, not the youthfully hopeful myth of Endymion, and that in "Oisin" Yeats selected a myth which was similar to Keats' cold awakening into desolate reality. Other poems which certainly would have affected Yeats' passionate interests were certain dedicatory poems to Dowden. One such poem was subtitled, "On Learning that he was to be Engaged upon the Life of Shelley," and another celebrates the occasion of receiving a gift copy of the biography. The latter poem, "To Edward Dowden," presents an experience of personal poetic development which emulates Dowden's own self-estimation

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[58] J. A. Spender ed., The Poems of William Watson (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905), in two volumes, p. x.

of his growth into poetic maturity. Shelley is praised as a poet who fired Watson's youth, "He held me in a world all clouds and gleams." But, "Anon the earth recalled me" into the more sensuous substantiality of Keats. Keats' poetry, "Soft as the bondage of white amorous arms" then gave way to the more adult appreciation of Wordsworth,

> Of lowly sorrows and familiar joys
> Of simple manhood, artless womanhood.

Shelley's political radicalism is compared unfavourably with Wordsworth's sober experience and tempered idealism. The poem ends with the Wordsworthian image which had inspired Dowden's theme of the widening stream of history's progress (in his Studies in Literature): the spirits of Wordsworth, and Watson, and Dowden are pictured as moving "tranquil" towards the pacific calm of eternal truth

> ...by Rotha stream
> And Rydal's mountain mirror, and where flows
> Yarrow thrice sung or Duddon to the sea.[59]

We can remember the dismay and bitterness with which Yeats viewed Dowden's appreciation of Shelley. Here was a poem which celebrated the denigration of Shelleyan inspiration and promoted "Wordsworthianism."

When Yeats threw himself into the cause of an Irish literary renaissance and began planning his first long poem "Oisin," he carried into his newfound enthusiasm all his aesthetic convictions. The battle lines previously defined, as, for example, in his article on Ferguson's poetry, were not simply polemical skirmishes on the sidelines of the main literary endeavour. We propose to show in the next chapter that the subject of "Oisin" is not the legend, but the meaning of the legend

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[59] Ibid., II, p. 148.

for a modern poet as a statement about art and life and the imagination. The young poet defined his position largely by its opposition to other values, and we will look at the expressed antagonisms in the poem as referring to established contemporary values against which the poet must make way. We can expect that Wordsworthianism would be one antagonist. We can expect that the zeal of an "Irish Victor Hugo" would seek to topple tyrannies political and cultural and would take scornful measure of Wordsworthian nature. The identification with Hugo's romanticism was prompted by the character of the struggle which Dowden had so well defined: the values espoused by that critic in his essay on Hugo appear in the complex of oppositions and antagonisms presented in "Oisin." Dowden valued poetry which assimilated the discoveries of science's "nature" and made him condescendingly critical of Hugo's heroes who were always "rebels" pitted against nature. For Yeats, there was an understandable attraction in Hugo's romanticism for it encouraged the view of a poet as a "personality" instead of as a natural force in platitudinous compliance with Wordsworthian nature or its progressive extension, the nature of scientific enlightenment. Yeats' somewhat glamorous identification with Hugo was apparently deliberate, considered, and to his mind responsibly critical. It was not a passing, ephemeral hero worship. Jeffares refers to an unpublished memoir which records Yeats confiding to Maud Gonne in 1888 that "I wished to become an Irish Victor Hugo."[60] Ernest Rhys remembers the young poet's adulation for Hugo during the late 1880's: in argument he was "an

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[60]A. Norman Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet (3rd. ed.; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 60.

admirer all hot of Victor Hugo."[61] And Hugo is implicitly linked with the inspiration behind "Oisin" in Yeats' essay "What is 'Popular Poetry'?" (1901). We also know that "Oisin" may have been related in some way with a projected Irish Légende des Siècles. Some time after the publication of the poem Yeats suggested that it might be considered as one of a series (like Morris' The Earthly Paradise, but having the more pointed relevance of Hugo's work). The significance of "Oisin" as it was planned, and written, however, was more comprehensive than a later, more circumspect Yeats would suggest. In his fondness for discovering retrospective pattern and perhaps for disguising the ambitious nature of the poem, he later described The Countess Cathleen as a "counter-truth" of Christian values to the pagan themes of "Oisin." There is, admittedly, a pattern of complementary "truth" in such a comparison, for the Oisin legend belongs to an earlier period where two religious worlds collided, and The Countess Cathleen was based on a folk tale of specifically Christian drama. We propose, however, that "Oisin" was a youthful tour de force, which ambitiously extended the themes we have been analyzing in the early verse into an encyclopedic pattern of history, literary epochs, and occult cosmology. The cycle of "Oisin" contains by deliberate design all "légendes des siècles" and at the same time expresses the poet's sense of his poetic vocation in the present "histrionic" moment.

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[61] Ernest Rhys, Everyman Remembers (London: Dent and Sons, 1931), p. 154.

CHAPTER III

THE IMMEDIATE BACKGROUND OF "THE WANDERINGS OF OISIN"

Yeats' explicit references to "The Wanderings of Oisin" in the Autobiographies and in essays will be reviewed first. These published references treat the poem either casually in passing, or more pointedly in a dismissive tone. In the Autobiographies where one might expect Yeats to give some space and emphasis to a poem which was his first major published work there are only allusions made to it, and these allusions seem designed by their occurrence to produce an anti-climactic effect. Thus, in the first section of the Autobiographies, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," which concludes with the events of the year 1886, the poem is referred to and dismissed in a somewhat anachronistic manner (it was written during the period 1885-1887 and was published in 1889), "Years afterwards when I had finished "The Wanderings of Oisin," dissatisfied with its yellow..."[1] In the next section of the Autobiographies, entitled "Four Years 1887-1891," which is the period of the poem's completion and its publication, there is only general mention made of it. References made in essays express only a dissatisfaction with the poem's style, an honest enough criticism perhaps, but one which screens any consideration of the poem's subject.

From the Autobiographies we have three critical references to the poem:

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[1] Auto., p. 74.

> ...when I had finished "The Wanderings of Oisin," dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately re-shaped my style, deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds. I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythm, and recognizing that all the criticism of life known to me was alien and English, became as emotional as possible but with an emotion which I described to myself as cold.[2]

> When in my twenty-second year I had finished "The Wanderings of Oisin," my style seemed too elaborate, too ornamental, and I thought for some weeks of sleeping upon a board.[3]

> ...after "The Wanderings of Oisin" I simplified my style by filling my imagination with country stories.[4]

Earlier references in essays published at the turn of the century similarly dispose of the poem by slighting references to its style and the announcement of a deliberate purgation:

> ...when I found my verses too full of the reds and yellows Shelley gathered in Italy, I thought for two days of setting things straight...by eating little and sleeping upon a board...[5]

> I could not now write of any other country but Ireland, for my style has been shaped by the subjects I have worked on, but there was a time when my imagination seemed unwilling, when I found myself writing of some Irish event in words that would have better fitted some Italian or Eastern event, for my style had been shaped in that general stream of European literature...and it was slowly, very slowly, that I made a new style. It was years before I could rid myself of Shelley's Italian light...[6]

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[2] Auto., p. 74.

[3] Auto., p. 371.

[4] Auto., p. 372.

[5] "What is Popular Poetry," 1901, reprinted in Essays and Introductions (London: MacMillan, 1961), p. 5.

[6] "Ireland and the Arts," 1901, reprinted in Essays and Introductions, p. 208.

Of the poem's structural significance and its philosophy there is no statement published by Yeats, apart from the "vain, allegorical dreams" reference in the late poem, "The Circus Animals' Desertion", and one passage from Wheels and Butterflies where he disclaims any "theory" beyond haunting abstractions. This latter we will quote at some length.

> When I was a boy everybody talked about progress, and rebellion against my elders took the form of aversion to that myth. I took satisfaction in certain public disasters, felt a sort of ecstasy in the contemplation of ruin, and then I came across the story of Oisin in Tir-nà-nOg and reshaped it into my "Wanderings of Oisin." He rides across the sea with a spirit, he passes phantoms,...emblematical of eternal pursuit, he comes to an island of choral dancing...comes to an island of endless battle for an object never achieved...comes to an island of sleep, leaves that and comes to Ireland, to Saint Patrick and old age. I did not pick these images because of any theory, but because I found them impressive, yet all the while abstractions haunted me. I remember rejecting because it spoilt the simplicity, an elaborate metaphor of a breaking wave intended to prove that all life rose and fell as in my poem. How hard it was to refrain from pointing out that Oisin after old age, its illumination half accepted, half rejected, would pass in death over another sea to another island. Presently Oisin and his islands faded and the sort of images that come into Rosa Alchemica and The Adoration of the Magi took their place. One civilization was about to reverse itself,...[7]

This assessment has the truth of later perspective in that it views the poem as lacking the coherent, systematic philosophy which Yeats felt he had only acquired through arduous effort long after its composition. One can recognize too in the reference to "impressive" and haunting abstractions a memory of the poem's "feverish" composition which letters written in 1889 record. However, this assessment glosses over the

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[7]"Introduction to The Resurrection," Explorations (London: MacMillan, 1962), pp. 392-393.

elaborate, if premature, philosophy which dictated the structure of "Oisin," which we proposed to show was not simply a counter-myth to "progress" but rather included an apocalyptic hope for a "neo-romantic movement," for that reversal of "our civilization." This hope was never admitted by Yeats in his scattered references to the poem, but it is admitted, and condemned, in a disguised form, in his denunciation of the poem's style.

The references to its style which we have quoted employ the metaphor of colour: Shelleyan reds, greens, and yellows were supposedly purged in the poet's search for a more native, astringent style appropriately imaged as "cold light." The revised editions of "Oisin," however, only modify the actual colour references in the first book of the poem. The effect gained is not one of a more astringent style but rather the opposite, for the changes seem designed to obscure the colour symbolism of the poem and the style is not "improved" in Yeats' definition of a desired change. The reader concludes that the "over-charged colour inherited from the romantic movement" finds a fictional yet convenient image in these colours (perhaps with Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" in mind, since destruction and renewal, Shelley's theme, has its affinities to Yeats' "ecstasy in the contemplation of ruin"). The specific colours mentioned repeatedly by Yeats in his criticism of the poem's style are peculiarly insistent, however, and we well might suspect they express not some generalized dissatisfaction with style but rather particular dissatisfaction; that they might be, in fact, symbolic shorthand for rather precise criticism of the poem's emotional colouring and the thematic logic of its structure. The "counter-myth"

which Yeats alludes to was not in fact the presiding inspiration of the poem, although it formed a satisfying part. Throughout the Autobiographies we are presented with Yeats' youthful literary ambitions and his idealism: he hoped to create an Irish Prometheus Unbound, he shared a romantic fervour embodied in O'Grady's books, and he extolled Ferguson homeric primitivism in his essay on that poet. The denial of any "theory" behind "The Wanderings of Oisin" is at variance with the self-conscious program which he had clearly proposed for himself. His troubled humanitarianism during his early years at the art school lacked direction: "I was constantly troubled about philosophic questions. I would say to my fellow students at the art school, 'Poetry and sculpture exist to keep our passions alive'...do the arts make us happier...' 'If I cannot be certain they make us happier I will never write again.'"[8] However, by 1886 when he wrote his essay on Ferguson, during which time he was writing "Oisin," he clearly had a definable cause and definite literary aims. None of this self-confessed "Shelleyan" idealism which the Autobiographies so candidly admit to is ever associated with the poem "Oisin"; in fact, it seems that by deliberate design the major poem of this early period is dissociated from prevailing theories and inspirations.

The "overcharged colouring" referred to in the criticism quoted is not simply the borrowed style of Shelley from which Yeats struggled to be free. We may suspect that Yeats' objection to the style involves the wider condemnation of the inspiration and actual symbolic content of the poem, and that these specific colours are clues to the character

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[8]Auto., p. 86.

of this inspiration and this content. Yeats' in these references, apparently remembers colour as part of the deliberate symbolic pattern of the poem. The colour symbolism is not limited to green, yellow and red but rather follows the range of the spectrum. However, these specific colours mentioned repeatedly by him remain in his memory because they refer to the ardent hopes which are characteristic of the poem's esoteric significance, hopes which are admitted in a private letter to Katherine Tynan where Yeats writing on the poem states, "My life has been in my poems. To make them I have broken my life in a mortar as it were. I have brayed in it youth and fellowship, peace and worldly hopes..."[9]

To illustrate the point that these references to colour are metaphoric, and furthermore that the metaphor relates not to "style" but rather to thematic significance, we can note the revisions of Book One of the poem. What Yeats did in his first revision of 1895 was subdue the sun imagery and replace it with pale moonlight in two instances. He also veiled the effect of primary colours which were associated with the ecstatic golden age of the first island by introducing waning stars, Druid dreams, and Druid swoons. In the first book, the colours red and yellow were symbolically employed to image the height of imaginative life which was to decline through the progress of the poem (like Shelley's glowing coal fading into ash). Yeats' revision for the 1895 edition simply disguises the effect of the original symbolic meaning. The effect on the "style" is certainly not in the direction of a "cold light," rather quite otherwise. Thus we have the

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[9]Wade, p. 84.

"crimson" sun becoming the "fading crimson," the "very flame" becoming "dying flame," the "central fires," the "smouldering fires," and "golden rhyme" becoming simply a "woodland rhyme." Yeats' real criticism of the poem was a reaction from its humanitarian zeal and its symbolic announcement of a deliverance from a tyrannous bondage. These are the "Shelleyan colours" which he wished to qualify or obscure. The rather elementary colour symbolism employed in "Oisin" was superceded by a more sophisticated codification which Yeats derived from his studies on Blake. Shortly after the completion of the poem's final drafts for publication, Yeats, in collaboration with Edwin Ellis, began preparing for an edition of the poet. Yeats' contribution to the joint enterprise included a study of Blake's colour symbolism and its correspondences. Blake had become Yeats' "master" of esoteric mythology[10] and it is through Yeats' codification of that poet's colour correspondences that one can appreciate the judgement made on some specific faults of "Oisin" which were loosely designated as stylistic. The table of correspondences presented[11] is as follows:

TABLE

	PHYSICAL	MENTAL
PINK	Flesh colour.	Wholesome Life. Imaginative Life.
RED	Fire. Heat.	Passion. Corporeal Love.

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[10]"Nationality and Literature," United Ireland (May 27, 1893), p. 1.

[11]Edwin Ellis and W. B. Yeats eds., The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical, edited with Lithographs of the Illustrated "Prophetic Books" and a Memoir and an Interpretation (London: Quaritch, 1893), 3 vols., I, p. 314.

YELLOW	Warm Light.	Mind. When the yellow is of a ruddy or golden colour it is symbolic of love.
GREEN	Vegetation.	Instinctive Life.
BLUE	Air where there is light.	Power without love.
WHITE	Clouds, Cold Light, The White of Flesh.	Reason without love.
BLACK	Earth. Darkness. The Grave. Night.	The unimaginative.

From this table it is clear that the aspirations for a new style of "cold light and tumbling clouds" reflect more than the theoretic principles that Yeats entertained on the desirability of presenting a "landscape" of Irish character as distinct from the "landscape" "shaped in that general stream of European literature." The poetry he was writing after "Oisin" employed an esoteric symbolism of increased density and a degree of stylization which it is difficult to reconcile with his announcement of a less elaborate style. Since the ideal of his new style is not noticeably evident in his poetry at the time, it should be understood as a dramatization, an emphatic theoretical criticism of the earlier manner, and more a statement of reaction than a description of the effects he was achieving in his poetry. What he rejected through the condemnation of Shelleyan reds, yellows, and greens, was that somewhat inchoate complex of ardent humanitarianism, and passionate hopes which were "brayed" out in the poem, a complex of emotional idealism recognizable in the table of correspondences. The new intensity was to be achieved more coolly by calculated effect and through a more sophisticated knowledge of esoteric symbolism. The poet who desired to write "a poetry of insight and knowledge" sought a style

of power and reason "without love," for "love" was too readily expressed in a Shelleyan manner, the influence of which Yeats was trying to limit and control. To worship at the temple of the sun where his "master" Blake kept his imagination at fiery heat, Yeats would have to ascend by calculated effort. The ascent to imaginative vigour symbolized by pink and red could not be achieved by writing simply with a "gusty energy" (the method he deliberately employed in "Oisin," especially in Book Two) for that would produce only the "overcharged colour" of a Hugo. "Oisin" was patterned on a table of correspondences similar to this Blakeian table. Degrees of imaginative vigour are charted symbolically in a progressive decline from Fire, to Air, to Water, to the Earth of Patrick's "unimaginative" condition. But Yeats had come to recognize how borrowed and literary his sources of inspiration were. The performance was not an achievement; rather it was a theoretical description of states of imaginative perception.

Other letters to Katherine Tynan in 1888 evidence the young poet's uncertainty about the poem's intelligibility and expresses a desire that the poem should have an "interpreter." The uncertainty is recorded in a letter of September 6, 1888 when Yeats had received the proofs. He writes, "Somewhat inarticulate I have been, I fear. Something I had to say. Don't know that I have said it. All seems confused, incoherent, inarticulate."[12] In his next letter he is more assured of the performance. "I have corrected the first two parts of "Oisin." The second part is much more coherent than I had hoped. You did not read the second part. It is the most inspired but the least articulate of the

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[12]Wade, p. 84.

three. The last has the most art...It really was a kind of vision... the third must have got itself expressed...Yet the second part is more deep and poetic."[13] In this same letter he asserts in guarded and mysterious fashion that, "In the second part of "Oisin" under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which only I have the key" and states that "the whole poem is full of symbols."[14] Desiring appreciation of the poem's significance to the common cause he shared with Tynan and expressed earlier in 1887 ("...we shall have a school of Irish poetry founded on Irish myth and history--a neo-romantic movement"[15]), Yeats did not want the poem's specific meanings to be discovered. Writing in February of 1889, one month after its publication and before most of the reviews were published, he evidently desired some appreciation of the poem's significance and yet, characteristically, did not wish his symbolic method to be prosaically analyzed. He was somewhat in the dilemma of desiring to keep his esoteric art from the profanity of public discovery and at the same time desiring some recognition of its scope and relevance. He encouraged a recognition of its allegorical method but disguised the significant content which that method was designed to veil.

> "Oisin" will rouse much opposition because it has more imaginative energy than any other poem in the book. To many people nothing seems sincere but the commonplace..."Oisin" needs an interpreter. There are three incompatible things that man is always

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[13]Wade, p. 87.

[14]Wade, p. 88.

[15]Wade, p. 33.

> seeking--infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose--hence the three islands.[16]

The complexity of Yeats' symbols and the elaborate allegory of the poem are not comprehended by this explanation. Yeats, who so carefully guarded the secrets of his art, could afford this rather "commonplace" explicitness because it pointed towards the poem's structural complexity. The three islands are simultaneously: the three stages of man's life, personal autobiography, geographical realities, and the microcosm which mirrors the macrocosmic cycle of epochs.

To appreciate the complex of emotional idealism which inspired the planning and writing of "Oisin" and to understand the theories which shaped its allegory, we must leave the judicious reminiscences of the Autobiographies which select and shape autobiography and go to other sources. We have already referred to letters which, despite later disavowals of any philosophy or "theory" behind the poem, assert deliberate symbolic character. We must now inquire into the character of inspiration which resulted in the "overcharged colour" of the poem, and attempt to discover the philosophy or general ideas which determined the structure of the poem. We will, accordingly, consider the probable inspirations which would encourage the scope of the poem, and Yeats' reasons for selecting this particular Irish legend. We will then consider the poet's theories of narrative verse in the romantic tradition which aspired to epic significance, and, recognizing the magnitude of the intended poem, attempt to discover the general philosophy or controlling ideas, which governed its structure.

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[16]Wade, p. 111.

During the years 1885 and 1886 when Yeats was planning "Oisin" he was closely associated with a newly formed magazine which was promoting Irish literature, the Dublin University Review. The seventeen issues of the journal appearing between March of 1885 and December of 1886 published Yeats' verse plays Mosada, The Island of Statues, and The Seeker, eight selections of his poetry, and his first critical article "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson." He was the largest single contributor to the magazine, and he shared, obviously with considerable zeal as the article on Ferguson reveals, the outlook, sympathies, and literary aims fostered by the review. It is in these publications, which reflect the issues, contentions, and aspirations current at the time, that we can best appreciate the conditions which fostered the planning of "Oisin." In its pages appeared essays by such established figures as O'Grady, Douglas Hyde and Justin M'Carthy who wrote on Irish literature; theosophical essays by Mohini Chatterjee and Charles Johnston; lyrics by Yeats' friends or contemporaries such as Katherine Tynan and Rosa Mulholland; book reviews, and the short notices and commentaries of meetings and speakers which reflect the nature and extent of activities associated with literary interests.

A review of the content of these issues presents the reader with a coherent sense of the immediate background for the genesis of "Oisin" as an expression of current hopes for the "neo-romantic movement" in Irish literature that he expressed to Tynan. The periodical conveniently concentrates on those otherwise disparate influences which the Autobiographies refer to, and a brief analysis of the contents of its issues recreates the emotional atmosphere and the sense of a literary

"movement" which is markedly different from the "anti-climactic reflection" which Ian Fletcher has described as the characteristic manner of the Autobiographies.[17] When Yeats was composing the first section of his Autobiographies some thirty years after the eventful years which are our present concern, his perspective was considerably affected by a strong sense of disappointment, even bitterness, which was not likely to emphasize the extravagant youthful ideals and personal ambitions which inspired the writing of "Oisin."[18]

Yeats was closely associated with the periodical throughout its short life; he had material published in the first and the last issues and in most of the intervening ones. In the March 1885 number, two of his lyrics appeared ("Song of the Fairies" and "Voices"). In the June issue, the first part of The Island of Statues appeared. Also included was an essay "Victor Hugo" by a W. F. S. which associated Hugo's romanticism and nationalism in terms significant to a desired Irish national literature (quoting Hugo, "Le romanticisme...n'est...que le libération en littérature," and implying the necessity of a liberation from English literary influences). For Yeats there was the reminder, if he needed one, that the cause of Irish culture was not receiving any encouragement from the establishment at Trinity: in "Notes and News" we learn that Professor Mahaffy is busy with his study on the Diadochi in his ancient history class; Professor Tyrrell is lecturing on Eumenides and preparing his second volume of Cicero's Correspondence for publication; Professor Dowden is lecturing on leaders of the Reformation and on the

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[17]Fletcher, p. 173.

[18]See footnote 1, Chapter I.

translators of the Bible, on Sydney, Spenser and Thomas More, and that the first volume of his biography of Shelley is ready for publication. In the June issue, the remainder of The Island of Statues appeared, and an article by his friend and convert to esoteric science, Charles Johnston, entitled "Esoteric Buddhism" (which was a resumé of Sinnett's book of that title which Johnston had delivered as a paper for a meeting of the Hermetic Society which Yeats had chaired). Katherine Tynan's "Louise de la Vallière" was reviewed favourably with praise of the poem "Waiting." This volume of verse was reviewed the following month in the Westminster Review (to which Dowden contributed frequently and which Yeats referred to as the "Benthamite" journal) with less sympathy: the reviewer criticized its character ("more sound than sense") and its lineage (with poets "who walk in the footsteps of Dante Gabriel Rossetti").[19] In the August issue appeared Justin M'Carthy's article "The Irish Language and Literature" which presented the possibilities of a literary renaissance based upon the "Homeric" ancient Irish legends. In his exhortation for new poets to realize the potential which the legends offer, M'Carthy places Oisin's supernatural journey at the climactic end of a long list of legends: "Nor must I forget that wonderful story of the adventures of Oisin in the land of youth, a legend which for phantasy, for the magic of poetic imagination, and for sweet sadness, has not, to my mind, its superior among all the legends of the earth."[20] There is also the notice that "Professor

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[19]Anonymous reviewer in The Westminster Review of July 1885, p. 288.

[20]Dublin University Review, Aug. 1885, p. 46.

Dowden's book on Shelley, now completed, and eagerly expected by the literary world, will not appear until the second volume is ready for press" and the announcement that Mr. Charles Johnston just returned from a visit to London's Theosophical Society, hopes to induce Mohini Chatterjee to visit Dublin. Yeats' "The Seeker" was published in the September number, and Douglas Hyde's article, "The Unpublished Songs of Ireland" which laments the inevitable disappearance of Celtic folk lyrics which "...will last as long as the tongue of Oisin lasts, and will die when it dies." Yeats would have recognized Hyde's characterization of the genius and the limitations of traditional Irish poetry: it has lyric intensity, but there is "the entire absence of that narrative, orderly, faculty which so greatly distinguishes the poetry of Teutonic nations." Yeats was familiar with Arnold's rather romanticized appreciation of the Celtic spirit in literature (John Eglinton quotes Yeats' early enthusiasm for Arnold during his years at the Dublin High School: "No one could write an essay now except Mathew Arnold"[21]). Arnold had popularized the criticism of that literature's lack of architectural structure, interpreting this deficiency as a necessary corollary to the literature's lyric qualities: "Celtic poetry seems to make up to itself for being unable to master the world and give an adequate interpretation of it, by throwing all its force upon style, by bending language at any rate to its will, and expressing the ideas it has with unsurpassable intensity, elevation, and effect."[22] And

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[21]John Eglinton, Irish Literary Portraits (London: MacMillan, 1935), p. 21.

[22]Mathew Arnold, The Study of Celtic Literature (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1905, p. 121.

Yeats would recognize Morris' similar distinction between Celtic and Norse literature from a conversation he had with Morris in Dublin in the early 1880's which he records in his essay "Cuchulain of Muirthemne," "I had some talk with him of old stories...of Norse epics which Morris contrasted with Irish--in the comparison of their distinct renderings of the battle of Clontarf. The Norseman was interested in the way things are done...[the Irish]...describe beautiful, supernatural events."[23] The Celtic imagination, Morris continued, was "extravagant" and was "always running off to Tir-nà-nOg, the land of Promise."[24]

Yeats in 1885, while he was reading the exhortations of M'Carthy, Hyde, and O'Grady in the pages of the Dublin University Review for a concerted literary effort to revive Irish literature, was planning an epic, and it is probable that this projected work evolved finally into "Oisin." It is not difficult to sketch out the aims and literary theories which would direct his planning. His general acceptance of Arnold's suppositions have been discussed previously in Chapter One. We may recall how acceptable he would find Arnold's appraisal of Celtic "Titanism" expressed in The Celtic Element in Literature as "that vein of piercing regret and passion" which "...MacPherson's Ossian carried in the last century...like a flood of lava through Europe." The Irish Titan in "The Two Titans" was struggling to emerge from English control, English as characterized in the aggressive materialism of Huxley (another of Arnold's famous antagonists). Arnold's suggested necessity for a religion of the arts became gospel for the young Yeats, and we have

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[23] Explorations, p. 7. My brackets.

[24] Ibid., p. 8.

already considered in detail how closely Yeats sympathized with the critic's appraisal of the sickness of contemporary literature and the need to attempt a poetry of heroic incident. "Oisin," as a letter to Tynan testifies, was distinct from Yeats' earlier work precisely in its architectonic structure and in its stress upon "incident, or a series of incidents." Yeats, it would seem, intended to remedy that deficiency of architectonic form which Arnold, Morris, and so many other men of letters accepted as a corollary to the lyric genius of Celtic literature. What was needed, and what Yeats intended to supply, was a comprehending philosophy and a pattern of symbols. He had, it would appear, no intention of simply emulating Morris' narrative poems, and Morris' brisk and generous observation to Yeats on "Oisin," "you write my kind of poetry," fails to appreciate the ambitious scope of the poem and its intended character.

The December, 1885 issue published a paper given at the Dublin Hermetic Society that same month, entitled "The Theosophic Septenary Constitution of Man." In the January, February, March, and April issues, Yeats' lyrics appeared. The May number contained Mohini Chatterjee's article "The Common Sense of Theosophy," a defense against common misconceptions held about this "science of religion" and an argument for its reasonableness. Both the December 1885 exposition and Chatterjee's defense were introductory in nature, and their content was familiar enough to Yeats who had been active in the Dublin Hermetic Society since its inception in 1885. Chatterjee's essay is of some interest, however, not only because it exemplifies the current interest in theosophy but also because it illustrates some of the specific

attractions probably expounded in much the same manner by Chatterjee to Yeats in private conversation during his visit to Dublin. Chatterjee's concern throughout the essay is to present theosophy as a reasonable approach to the "fundamental truth upon which all religions are based." Its central axiom of the subjective condition of truth was, of course, familiar to Yeats long before he became acquainted with the books of Sinnett which introduced him to these studies. But the essay's central emphasis upon the coherence of its system, and, moreover, its potential for assimilating various conflicting disciplines in a reasonable and objective way had a strong appeal to Yeats as a poet so aware of the fragmented nature of the modern mind. The coherence theosophy offers, writes Chatterjee, was not "eclecticism, which is a mosaic...(but)...an organic whole."[25] For the young poet who was planning an epic narrative poem and who recognized the need for a philosophic framework to give the desired architectural structure to his poem, there were possibilities in the patterns and correspondences of theosophy.

In the same May issue, Standish O'Grady's article on Davis' chronology of Ireland, entitled "Chronology of Ireland"[26] presented an appeal to literary men to mine the Irish legends so that the national imagination could become enriched. O'Grady's appeal to a common literary endeavour was not limited to his publications: Yeats records elsewhere his personal contact with the writer during this year,[27] a

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[25]Mohini Chatterjee, "The Common Sense of Theosophy," Dublin University Review (May, 1886, pp. 386-396), p. 389.

[26]Standish O'Grady, "Chronology of Ireland," Dublin University Review (May, 1886), pp. 397-407.

[27]"I Became An Author," The Listener (Aug. 4, 1938), p. 28.

contact which must have quickened his early admiration for the author of the History of Ireland which Yeats had read with enthusiasm. O'Grady's openly defended method of an imaginative recreation of myths and legends (he rather scorned the spiritual or literary usefulness of "scholarly" approaches) will be discussed later in our consideration of the character of his History of Ireland as an important source for the ambitious plan of "Oisin." His romantic and highly individual methods of enlivening sources which were necessarily fragmented and sketchy, by making imaginative connections, is evident in this essay. He openly exhorts Irish writers to give imaginative form (that is, architecture) to their recreation of legends: "A deep harmony pervades this seeming chaotic history of ours. It is there waiting for our literary men to make it heard."[28] He sounds the note of hope in a new renaissance of literature in Ireland, in phrases which suggest epic opportunities for new poets, and describes "the great bardic literature" as a "sort of hymn to the Muses in the beginning."[29] In 1886 Yeats could look back with romantic nostalgia to this fresh ardent world of simple, primary emotions, and look forward with a young man's belief in a rebirth of a "neo-romantic school" of Irish literature. The "history" of the intervening centuries, which he read through "literary eyes," was the history of epochs of literature, a process of degeneration to which many theorists of literature attested, and with whom Yeats was thoroughly familiar. This belief in a rebirth argued for a cyclic interpretation of history which both contradicted the popular philosophy of "progress"

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[28] O'Grady, "Chronology of Ireland," p. 406.

[29] Ibid., p. 405.

in its return to primitivism and justified Yeats' hopes for a resurgence of epic grandeur into literature. Yeats was planning a poem about the salvation of a race, not a poem simply about the salvation of the individual soul,[30] as his later remarks which so deliberately limit the character of "Oisin" would imply. The eagle men, their Titan forms slumbering in the dewy grass of the third and last island to which the Muse figure, Niamh, has brought Oisin, are "Waiting." This word is the title of a poem by Katherine Tynan reviewed in the Dublin University Review of July, 1885 which employed the theme of an awakening of the old gods without Yeats' sense of dramatic imminence. Shelley's Prometheus, Keats' "The Fall of Hyperion," Arnold's theme of "Titanism," Hugo's romantic nationalism are all literary influences behind these figures of awesome awakening. The poem "Oisin" exists within the frame of the confrontation between Oisin and Patrick, and ends on an individual, personal note which is obviously to be equated with Yeats' struggle against the prevailing contemporary antagonists. But Oisin's journeys to the three islands is his vision, and that vision encompasses and comprehends by a wider wisdom the limited historical confrontation (whether in the second century or in the late nineteenth century). "How hard it was to refrain from pointing out that Oisin...would pass in death over another sea to another island" writes Yeats many years later[31] with an emphasis upon personal immortality which so preoccupied

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[30]This late reference expresses the concern for personal immortality: "How hard it was to refrain from pointing out that Oisin after old age,...would pass in death over another sea to another island." Explorations, p. 393. However the eternity of race was the deliberate theme of "Oisin."

[31]Ibid., p. 393.

him during his old age. The theme of personal immortality is consistent with the autobiographical plane of meaning in the poem, but in the epic spirit of the poem Yeats was willing to subject his hero (and himself) to the epic theme of national rebirth. It is not difficult to see in those repeated figures of youth prematurely grey of his early poems the same theme evident in letters on the sacrifice of the life to the work where he says he poured his life into his poems, "To make them I have broken my life in a mortar as it were." This is not simply a literary borrowing from Shelley, nor dramatic self-posturing. As he wrote to Tynan about "Oisin," "I have brayed in it youth and fellowship, peace and worldly hopes,"[32] an admission which emphasizes humanitarian hopes, not a concern for personal immortality. How hard it must have been "to refrain from pointing out" that Oisin's Fenian values were to be renewed in contemporary Ireland, and that those slumbering Titans on the third island were envisioned as ready to awaken. Writing in The Listener in 1938 Yeats recalled how just before or immediately after the publication of The Island of Statues he "fell under the influence" of O'Leary and O'Grady: "Because of the talk of these two men...I turned my back on foreign themes, decided that race was more important than the individual, and began my Wanderings of Oisin."[33]

The June 1886 issue, which published Mosada, repeats the public theme which became, I argue, the intended theme of "Oisin." Charles Oldham, a friend and patron of Yeats, wrote an article in this same issue on "The Prospects of Irish Nationality" expressing the need for

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[32]Wade, p. 84.

[33]"I Became an Author," p. 218.

"a clear view of our individuality as a people, of our destiny as a nation."[34] The theme is repeated elsewhere in the issue, quite aptly for a periodical so infused with the sense of the historical moment which the times presented, under the column "Notes of the Month": "A nation without a literature of its own, an imaginative literature stamped with the characteristics of its own genius...is a nation without a soul."[35] It is the "soul" of a nation not the soul of personal interest which is the recurring theme. The extent of Yeats' enthusiasm for a literary cause is manifest in his article on Ferguson's poetry published in the November issue of the review. He had, as is evident in that article, associated himself wholeheartedly with an enterprise in which a neo-romantic school of literature could serve nationalism without becoming subservient to political ends. Yeats had found in O'Leary that admirable practical idealism which would not dissociate the dignity of the individual from the dignity or "morale" of a nation. O'Leary's pronouncement, "There are some things a man must not do to save a nation" condemned the sacrifice of individual truth to an abstract ideal. For a poet who, though filled with humanitarian zeal, and at this period no defender of literary "coteries," had nevertheless inherited a strong sense of art's imaginative freedom, O'Leary was a living testament to the possibility of an harmonious relation between the arts and politics. He was more than a sufficient counter weight, Yeats felt, to propagandists like J. F. Taylor who, though equally a

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[34]Charles Oldham, "The Prospects of Irish Nationality," Dublin University Review (June, 1886), p. 468.

[35]"Notes For the Month," Dublin University Review (June, 1886), p. 546.

disciple of O'Leary, served abstractions with passionate, intellectual zeal aptly characterized by his statement, "Individual liberty is of no importance, what matters is national liberty."[36]

Yeats, as we have argued in the second chapter, had other more immediate literary antagonists, and in the September issue of 1886 an editorial comment occasioned by the death of Sir Samuel Ferguson presents a criticism which the young poet shared: "The learned Professor Mahaffy assures us that 'There never was a more loyal or orderly British citizen.' Probably enough, but there are many various ways in which a man may be orderly or the reverse, and we doubt very much whether Samuel Ferguson would feel complimented..."[37] In the November issue appears Yeats' essay "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson," an essay which we must consider in some detail because it so fully reveals Yeats' commitment to a national literature and defines through his appreciation of Ferguson's poetry his own conception of the nature and scope of his literary ambitions.

The essay is both a defense of the "homeric" spirit of Ferguson's poetry and an attack on the alien literary values which are hopelessly inadequate for any appreciation of that spirit. The essay's convictions are passionately expressed, and one can recognize among its literary inspirations Byron's "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" and Shelley's personal identification with Keats in Adonais. The assessment of Ferguson is extremely personal. Oppressed by the sheer weight of an

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[36]Yeats attributes the statement to Taylor, "Introduction to The Words Upon the Window-Pane," Explorations, p. 357.

[37]Editorial commentary, Dublin University Review (Sept. 1886), p. 796.

alien literary tradition expressed by the entrenched establishment at Trinity College, Yeats presents Ferguson's career in heightened and very romantic colours. His genius was a victim to a patronizing criticism which continues in its ironically servile posture, "ears to the ground listening for the faintest echoes of English thought." Ferguson suffered accordingly: "The greatest of his faculties was killed long ago by indifference."[38] The satiric spirit which was to inspire the episode of Oisin's battle with the very "literary" demon in Book Two of "Oisin" is evident in Yeats' pointed references to both Professors Dowden and Mahaffy. Dowden, somewhat the Addison figure of Pope's satire, holds a jealous court over the reputation of his contemporaries (he would have served his "own interests" better, writes Yeats, if he had given a more generous recognition to a poet whom posterity will recognize as important). Mahaffy's simple reductionism of literary values to social conventions is referred to: "Lately another professor at Trinity appears to have taken most pleasure in writing, not that the author of Congal was a fine poet, nor that he was a profound antiquarian, but assuring us that he was an 'orderly citizen'."[39] The scathing attack on the "shoddy society of 'West Britonism'" (which is Yeats' description of the Trinity establishment) is enlarged to include the alien English literary values, and its Victorian conventions: "No one will deny excellence to the Idylls of the King; no one will say that Lord Tennyson's Girton girls do not look

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[38]"The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson," Dublin University Review (Nov. 1886), p. 924.

[39]Ibid., p. 924.

well in those old costumes of dead chivalry."[40] Yeats' criticism extends to the whole character of modern English literature, contrasting it with the primitive vigour of the early Irish legends:

> At once the fault and the beauty of nature description of most modern poets is that for them the stars, and streams, the leaves, and the animals, are only masks behind which go on the sad soliloquies of a nineteenth century egoism. When the world was fresh they gave us a clear glass to see the world through, but slowly, as nature lost her newness... the glass was dyed with ever-deepening colours, and now we scarcely see what lies beyond because of the pictures that are painted over it.[41]

Such a generalization anticipates or reflects the master theme of "Oisin" and its resultant structure.

The scorn for Ferguson's critics is matched by Yeats' zeal for that poet's potential significance to a new, national, literary movement. The immediate tradition is defined and related to Ferguson's importance: "The nation has found in Davis a battle cry, as in Mangan its cry of despair; but he only, the one Homeric poet of our time, could give us immortal companions still wet with the dew of their primal world."[42] In Ferguson's poetry we can observe the "morning" of a renaissance; "the years are ripe"[43] for the new literature. In a dramatic identification, Yeats presents Ferguson as a legendary figure who has present mythological significance: "...the one man of his time who wrote heroic poetry--one who, among the somewhat sybaritic singers of his day, was

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[40] Ibid., p. 931.

[41] Ibid., p. 940.

[42] Ibid., p. 925.

[43] Ibid., p. 940.

like some aged sea-king sitting among the inland wheat and poppies--the savour of the sea about him, and its strength."[44] Here, surely, is the autobiography and myth which inspired the poem "The Madness of King Goll." More importantly, this imaginative identification is extended in "Oisin" where one of the most significant additions to the legend which Yeats adopted was the figure of the sea-king Mananan whose castle has been usurped by the "dusky demon" of alien rule, and whose progeny, Ireland, is a chained captive. The contemporary significance of the allegory "Oisin" is prefigured everywhere in this essay.

It remains to be noted how concerned Yeats was with the importance of design and structure. His assessment of the qualities of Ferguson's long narrative poems reflect his preoccupation with a problem he was experiencing in his planning of "Oisin." It is with our previous remarks on the critical theories of Arnold and Morris in mind that we can best appreciate this concern and this emphasis. The Arnoldian "Celtic" qualities reaffirmed, "the real implacable nature of Celtic spirit which loves and hates passionately,"[45] are opposite to the sybaritic indolence of an "inland" poetry of wheat and poppies. But the "leprosy of the modern" is not only "tepid emotions" but also the diffuseness and fragmentary character of its "many aims."[46] Reacting against the small lyric worlds of modern verse, Yeats announces a criterion for critical appreciation which reflects his present concern (and defines quite clearly his later theory and practice), "To know the meaning and mission

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[44] Ibid., p. 940.

[45] Ibid., p. 940.

[46] Ibid., p. 940.

of any poet we must study his works as a whole."[47] Yeats' concern for the architecture of the whole opus derogates the brief verbal facilities of minor poets: "Beauty," he announces, "lies in the great mass."[48] What Yeats saw adumbrated in Ferguson's deliberate ordering of his collected poems were the epic outlines which he himself quite histrionically applied to his own "meaning and mission."

If the "mission" of the new poetry was clear, there remained for Yeats the problem of organizing the many diverse elements which competed for inclusion in the planning of "Oisin." That it was to employ legend as a significant interpretation of the contemporary literary "moment" can be expected from the sense of urgency everywhere displayed in his literary and quasi-political activities during the time of its composition. The problems of structure were formidable, but he had in the example of O'Grady's book, The History of Ireland, the encouragement to treat legend in a highly interpretive manner. Personal contact with O'Grady during 1886 probably gave further impetus for an "epic" interpretation of the Oisin legend. It was O'Grady's book which had influenced Yeats' generation by its romantic recreation of Irish myth and legend, and Yeats in later essays and in the Autobiographies records the inspiring character the work had for him in his youth. His later assessment, however, presents a criticism which parallels his later statements on the style of "Oisin," and suggests what we might expect: that O'Grady's attractive book was a strong influence on the character of Yeats' first major poem. In the Autobiographies he notes:

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[47] Ibid., p. 925.

[48] Ibid., p. 925.

> ...his unfinished History of Ireland has made the old Irish heroes Finn, and Oisin, and Cuchulain, alive again...condensing and arranging, as he thought Homer would have arranged and condensed...Lady Gregory has told the same later...with greater powers of arrangement...but O'Grady was the first, and we read him in our teens.[49]

The later Yeats speaks loyally for his friend and co-worker, Lady Gregory, and the comparison of her book on legends with that of O'Grady's is doubtless partly prompted by the intention to compliment. But there seems to be behind the criticism of O'Grady's "power of arrangement" evidence of Yeats' sensitivity on the influence of a work which was arranged "as he thought Homer would have arranged." Was the young Yeats' "Oisin," we must ask, embarrassingly limited to the romantic conceptions and style of O'Grady's history? A later reference in Wheels and Butterflies repeats the criticism more directly:

> In the eighties of the last century Standish O'Grady, his mind full of Homer, retold the story of Cuchulain that he might bring back an heroic ideal. His work, which founded modern Irish literature, was hasty and ill-constructed, his style marred by imitation of Carlyle...[50]

The description "hasty and ill-constructed" may well be prompted by Yeats' later criticism of "Oisin", parts of which were written in a "fever" of urgency, and which, as we have noted, was later criticized by its author as being too overcharged with romantic colour. The poem's intended "homeric" scope we will later discuss from other evidence of Yeats' ambitious literary aims at the time of its planning.

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[49]Auto., p. 221.

[50]"'Fighting the Waves': Introduction," Explorations, p. 371.

O'Grady's introduction to the first volume of his history is an extended consideration of the problems of approaching the often chaotic character of the myths and legends of Irish antiquity. He intends no "scientific" method of arrangement or interpretation, seeing in the very "objectivity" of such an approach a misunderstanding of the historical meanings of this literature, and an approach which is too narrow for significant appreciation.

> Nearly every work which one takes up affecting to treat of the past in a rigid and conscientious spirit, is merely archaeological. It is an accumulation of names, dates, disquisitions...all works of this character are of the nature of archaeology; they are the material of history, not history itself.[51]

Previous researchers such as Keating and O'Curry employed methods which have obvious limitations. Keating tried to get at the essential history in the legends, "Treating them as history, he attached no importance to those qualities which alone have any value to me; viz., the epic and dramatic."[52] O'Curry laboured to compile all related legends around central characters, but this method presented a shapeless world "without harmony, meaning, or order."[53] O'Grady's concern is to recreate imaginatively what he considered to be the real "history" which the legends represent; but he intends in his emphasis upon the historical to avoid the free license of a fanciful arrangement of legend and to avoid the opposite approach, equally faulty, of a glib, rationalistic "explanation" of the legend's imaginative character. Thus,

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[51]Standish O'Grady, History of Ireland (London: Sampson Low, Searle, Marston, and Rivington, 1878), 2 vols., I, iii.

[52]Ibid., p. vii.

[53]Ibid., p. vii.

> If it be asked whether the principal characters of the heroic age really existed, I would myself answer that they certainly did. I have the strongest disbelief in the incapacity of the uncivilized mind to create imaginary characters, or to discover a personality in the various beautiful or sublime aspects of nature. The Wordsworthian notion of the genesis of all gods and fairies, I think incorrect. I believe that all the characters in the volume really existed, and had more or less the general attributes with which they are invested.[54]

The modern spirit has explained away the actual relation of legend to history, and,

> ...accounting for the origin of the classical deities by guesses and a priori reasoning, has almost universally adopted that explanation which I have, elsewhere, called Wordsworthian, and which derives them directly from the imagination personifying the aspects of nature.[55]

The process of history creating legend is described: revered heroes were elevated as gods, and their tombs to temples; the growing Pantheon of gods necessitated the displacement of older deities who then were reinterpreted as ancient heroes or giants of some remote epoch, primordial forms of mysterious power. This rather naturalistic explanation of O'Grady's, while avoiding the rationalization of "Wordsworthian" explanation, was not, in all probability, especially attractive to Yeats. The young poet was familiar (through Shelley) with a much more radical interpretation of the relation between history and the imaginative process. We have in a Bookman review written several years after "Oisin" an expression of Yeats' preference for interpreting legend not as a subsequent expression of "history," but rather as the

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[54] Ibid., p. xviii.

[55] Ibid., p. 76.

imaginative power which shapes history.[56] O'Grady was an ally against the reductionism of the rationalist Wordsworthian interpretation, but for the disciple of Shelley, his approach lacked an understanding of the radical idealism of the imagination's primacy. Yeats, at the time he was planning "Oisin," was interested in prophecy, not retrospective analysis nor romantic nostalgia for an "historical" epoch confined to the past. For him, the revival of the legends in the new literary movement meant the incarnation of those heroic values in the living present and the shaping of Irish history to come. The influence of O'Grady lies less in the method of his interpretation than in the spirit of imaginative recreation which he espoused, and in the emphasis he placed upon the significant "harmony" which lay behind apparent disorder.

If The History of Ireland was an example of the successful rendering of legends and encouraged the youthful Yeats to emulate its boldness of interpretive design, it was also influential in its highly wrought romantic style. The first volume expresses the tumultuous world of vast mythic beings largely through the inspiration of epic romance. The

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[56] Yeats' "The Story of Early Gaelic Literature," a review of Douglas Hyde's book of that title, appeared in The Bookman (June, 1895). The relevant passage discounts the merely historical interpretation in favour of the racial values of a living, legendary interpretation: "In the great controversy which divides Irish scholars as to whether Finn or Cuchulain...are legend coloured by history or history coloured by legend, Dr. Hyde throws in his lot with those who hold them historical in the main; and this choice seems to an obstinate upholder of the other theory but a part of the one capital defect of his criticism. He is so eager to convince...of the historical importance... that occasionally he seems to forget the noble phantasy and passionate drama which is their crowning glory." p. 86.

> Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions,
> Majesties, sovran voices, agonies

of this mythic period are presented, as this quotation from "Hyperion" which prefaces the volume suggests, in a very literary manner. To orchestrate the "harmony" which he intends to present, O'Grady prefaced each chapter with quotations, invoking a popular literary tradition in order to invite the reader into imaginative consent to his recreation of myth. Epic sweeps and romantic mystery combine in the conglomerate of quotations ranging from Homer to contemporary poets. The prevalent tone is the epic (quotations from Homer and Milton abound) but the characteristic quotations which combine both romance and epic endeavour, so appropriate to O'Grady's conception of the spirit through which these myths should be approached, are those from Keats' "Hyperion" fragments. A quotation from "Hyperion" prefaces the volume, and six other chapters begin with excerpts from Keats' poetry: the perhaps inevitable "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the appropriate sestet opening of the sonnet on Chapman's Homer (Yeats, as Katherine Tynan recalls, was reading Chapman's translation during the period of "Oisin's" composition[57]), and four excerpts from the "Hyperion" poems. The "Hyperion" excerpts are echoed understandably by the excerpts from Homer and Milton, achieving a probably intended effect as a part of the strategy of O'Grady's organization: the fragmentary myths, introduced by brief excerpts (or fragments) of well known epics, appeal to the imagination's sense of a harmony in the apparent formlessness of the myths. That Keats' "Hyperion" poems should be the most frequently

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[57]Katherine Tynan, Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences, p. 190.

quoted is, again, quite appropriate. These poems are themselves fragments, the attempt in the romantic age to achieve an epic objectivity: their prevalence is symbolic, as it were, of O'Grady's effort to present the epic "harmony" of the myths. That he must inevitably look back to the myths through the nineteenth century's romantic eyes he recognizes in his introduction.[58] His emphasis upon epic poetry is an attempt to get behind the self-consciousness which he believed separated the modern mind from the primitive.

The romantic perspective so obvious in the highly coloured manner of O'Grady's style is, for the author, an admitted, inescapable condition of our "civilization." It is only by imaginative effort that the modern can attempt to experience the primitive mode of thought: "Romance is a product of civilization, and belongs to a luxurious and leisured age. The bardic tales were to our ancestors genuine history, and implicitly believed in. In their genesis there was never anything like conscious creation."[59] Despite O'Grady's active promotion of a literary renewal through a familiarity with Irish tradition and his exhortations for a bold approach in the handling of the myths and legends and in the recreation of their heroic spirit, he accepts the limitations imposed by the necessity of history. The decline of imaginative vigour may find a pause, or be arrested by a concerted national literary effort, but there is no expressed hope for a radical "return" to the primitive in the consciousness of the nation. O'Grady could preface the first chapter of volume one with Shelley,

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[58] O'Grady, History of Ireland, I, xix.

[59] Ibid., p. xix.

> Worlds on worlds are rolling ever,
> From creation to decay
> Like the foam-flakes on the river,
> Bubbling, bursting, borne away,

but this passage is intended to characterize the titanic revolutions of mythic dynasties rather than to suggest any imminent apocalypse and a renewal in "history" of the primitive, unscientific consciousness. For Yeats, brought up on Shelley, the passage would have more prophetic and hopeful meanings.

O'Grady's history is steeped in the epic manner of Keats' "Hyperion" poems and this, it may be, is sufficient explanation for the very Keatsian imagery which has been noted in the second book of "Oisin." The Keatsian echoes may be irrelevant to the conscious structure of the poem, either an inadvertent influence through O'Grady or simply the inevitable influence of a poet who, as Yeats later said (echoing Morris), "makes pictures one cannot forget."[60] Or, it may be, the inclusion of so much Keats was deliberate and part of the pattern of the poem. We may have, in Yeats' essay on Ferguson, an indication of the deliberate design of Yeats' romantic association of Keats' genius, which was either misunderstood or arrogantly slandered, with that of Ferguson. The association would seem to be somewhat strained, until it is remembered that one should read Yeats for Ferguson, and for Ferguson's critics, Yeats' own antagonists in the struggle to assert a new poetry. Yeats' later emphasis in the Autobiographies on the Shelleyan influence and his relative silence on Keats lead the reader away from any such association, but we may suspect that the retrospective interpretation

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[60]Hone, W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939, p. 296.

which discounted any "theory" behind "Oisin" and also separated the poem from a consideration of its significant context (as an epic announcement of a "neo-romantic" movement) is possibly misleading.

The general indebtedness of the Pre-Raphaelites to Keats needs no elaboration, and the young Yeats, "in all things pre-Raphaelite," was consciously writing in its tradition. What is more relevant to our discussion of the inspiration for the planning of "Oisin," where Yeats was concerned with the problems of the character and scope of an "epic" poem, is his appreciation of the "Hyperion" poems. The reputation of these poems among Yeats' senior Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries was growing, but the characteristic inspiration which Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Morris found in Keats was associated more with the romances, most epitomized by "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Dante Gabriel Rossetti could call "Hyperion" the "crown of Keats's genius"[61] but its mythological themes and its epic inspiration were not of paramount interest to him. For Rossetti and Morris, Keats was a "master" distinct from Shelley or Wordsworth not only because of his pictorial language and sensuous concreteness, but also because he was the figure of the pure artist who characteristically excluded from his art all public, political, and social-moral questions. The self-questioning of Keats in "The Fall of Hyperion" where the poet considers the wide responsibility of his role as a man among men, advanced in a direction of social relevance from which the later "aesthetic" school retreated. The fragmentary nature of the "Hyperion" poems was argument enough for the difficulty or

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[61]George H. Ford, Keats and the Victorians (London: Shoestring Press, 1944), p. 143.

impossibility of producing such comprehensive poetry, and it was only too obvious that an attempt late in the century, when the widening division between poetry and public themes was increasingly apparent, would probably result in the complete abdication of what had now admittedly become the Palace of Art.

Morris, whose esteem for Keats was one of "boundless admiration,"[62] stated his indebtedness to this "master" of narrative verse, but his appreciation was in fact bounded by the poetic world of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." This poem was, for Morris, "the germ" from which all the poetry of his group had sprung.[63] Its characteristic inspiration is elaborated in Morris' prose romance "The Man Who Never Laughed Again" which was the favourite of Yeats, and Morris' The Earthly Paradise moves in a world comprehended by Keats' ballad. The Earthly Paradise, to which Yeats' "Oisin" had from its first appearance been compared, presents the journey across the western sea to another age, its twelve stories admittedly creating the wish-fulfillment of romance. For the idle singer of an empty day, the real world in its relation to the dream is essentially defined by the pessimism symbolized by the moon in the November poem:

> The changeless seal of change it seemed to be
> Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
> Bright sign of loneliness too great for me
> Strange image of the dread eternity
> In whose void patience how can these have part
> These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?

How similar these outstretched feverish hands are to the recurrent images

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[62]Ford, p. 152.

[63]Ford, p. 152.

in "Oisin" of the youth pursuing the phantom girl, and how clearly the whole framing legend of "Oisin" fits the world of Keats' ballad. In "Oisin," Niamh is the faery visitant who brings the poet into a world of enchantment, and just as the poet must awaken into a world of Keats' grey reality "where no birds sing," so too is Oisin awakened into reality by a starling falling from the sky. But does the framing legend define the significance of the poem as a whole? Are dream and reality so simply presented? The theme of the infinite sadness of love, of the inextricable relation of beauty and sorrow made the Oisin legend attractive to Yeats and the poem reflects Yeats' identification of the Celtic genius with Arnold's well-known characterization so attractive to Yeats, as a "delicate melancholy, the tone of old, unhappy, far-off things...of magic casements, of lost causes and impossible loyalties...in short the style of...all that is the opposite of getting and spending, the physical activities which have laid waste the power of England."[64] The elegaic note is pronounced in "Oisin," as is the open rhetorical confrontation between Oisin, spokesman for "lost causes and infinite loyalties," and Patrick, who demands submission towards the new "objectivity." But the elegaic is not a mere reflection of Arnold's Celticism, which is more the cry of the heart against the brutal facts of contemporary historical circumstance. For Yeats, a cyclical theory of history found in the circumstance of contemporary despair evidence for a renewal of hope. Life might finally be, as Yeats came increasingly to realize, the heroic cry against necessity, but "necessity" in "Oisin" was not limited to the mind-forged manacles

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[64]Mathew Arnold, The Study of Celtic Literature, p. 96.

of Grey Truth. The Grey Truth of science and "objective" religions was in the expectations of the young Yeats an historical circumstance which a wider theory and a neo-romantic movement could circumvent. In the simplicity of his enthusiasm he had not yet come to learn, as he later did, that the particulars of historical circumstance reflect man's existential condition. In "Oisin" there is the prophetic action of breaking the iron chains which shackle the contemporary imagination. The consequent freedom lies in the enlargement of man's imagination, in the renewal of an Homeric sensibility; not in an escape from Necessity, but in an escape from the confining fictions of a scientific age. The "counter-myth" intended in "Oisin" counters the limited myth of "progress" by its theory of cyclical history, and announces a liberating renewal of primitive imaginative life. The elegaic element in "Oisin" is misinterpreted if it is seen as a celebration or indulgence of a poetic mannerism. The heart's cry against necessity was designed to be heroic, and was intended to be as far removed from mere romantic nostalgia as the epic scheme of the poem is removed from the contemporary myth of progress. In fact, romantic nostalgia for the "far-off" is quite obviously a reaction, not a counter-statement, to the myopic myth of progressivism, and is more characteristic of Morris' The Earthly Paradise than it is of Yeats' poem, or at least of his intention in his poem.

The Keats who would have provided an interesting and highly relevant example for Yeats at the time of his planning "Oisin" is the Keats of "Sleep and Poetry" and of the "Hyperion" poems, the Keats who expressed a concern for his growth as a poet and deliberately

experimented with an epic form. The youthful "Sleep and Poetry" defined Keats' basic aesthetics, speculated on a poet's responsibilities (the germ of the "Hyperion" poems is evident this early in his career), and indulged in a polemical broadside against neo-classical "hobby-horse" verse. The "Hyperion" poems are a deliberate essay in the epic mode, poems which move boldly and honestly into the question of the moral relation of art to life. It is this Keats, the satirist and the active protagonist, not the Keats of dreamy indolence, which must have been of conscious significance to the poet of "Oisin." We can recall the ardent humanism of Yeats at this period and the hopes which he says he "brayed" out in "Oisin." We know how committed he felt towards the ideals of the new literature, and we have seen evidence of his interest in "epic" qualities (both in the moral character of the epic and in its stylistic and structural qualities). We can recognize in the poem itself significant autobiographical reference when the poet-figure Oisin, erstwhile the poet of rhymes "glorious as Asian birds," pledges his complete dedication to Niamh, the Irish muse,

> Thee will I wed
> Young Niamh, and thou shalt be callen
> Beloved in a thousand songs. ("Oisin," 1889 text, I, 74-76)

This passage describes not only the induction into the dream but also announces the deliberateness of Yeats' intention to advance into a new kind of poetry. Keats in Endymion had written a poem which could fairly be described as a poem of states of mind, like the "thicket at Howth" which Yeats referred to as an illustration of his concept of a long poem before he began planning "Oisin."[65] In the "Hyperion" poems Keats

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[65]Wade, p. 106.

had deliberately attempted a "poetry of incident," Yeats' phrase for defining his new concept of a long poem which was to distinguish "Oisin" from previous work. Keats' concern in the "Hyperion" poems was for a more public poem, responsive to the larger responsibilities of the true poet as distinct from the "dreamer." The "Hyperion" poems were not "a little Region to wander in." Yeats' commitment to Irish themes was public and the dream he followed was intended to be "world-transforming," not escapist. The plainness of style which Yeats intended in "Oisin" was again similar to Keats' deliberate essay in a more "naked" style. Keats in a letter dated January 23, 1818, referring both to the completed Endymion and the projected "Hyperion" as possible subjects for paintings by Haydon, writes: "...in Endymion I think you may have many bits of the deep and sentimental cast--the nature of Hyperion will lead me to treat it in a more naked and Grecian manner."[66] Yeats' deliberate experiment with a style of "gusty" energy (which he associated with the epic spirit of Hugo's romanticism[67]) was intended as the style best suited to the rendering of Irish legend. The young poet who since the age of seventeen had "constantly tested my own ambition with Keats' praise of him who left 'great verse unto a little clan'"[68] would inevitably and self-consciously interpret his own intended growth into the heroic mode with Keats' deliberate essay into poetry which reached beyond the "deep and sentimental cast" of his earlier Endymion.

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[66]Keats' letter to Haydon, Jan. 23, 1818 in The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of Keats, ed. with intro. by Harold E. Briggs (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1951), p. 431.

[67]"What is 'Popular Poetry'?", Essays and Introductions, p. 4.

[68]Auto., p. 120.

A reference in the Autobiographies prompts additional speculation on the role played by J. B. Yeats in directing his son towards the example of Keats' "Hyperion" poems. Yeats recalls "'The Man Who Never Laughed Again' seemed to me the most wonderful of tales till my father accused me of preferring Morris to Keats."[69] Yeats' memory of his father's objection is related to the prose romance whose theme is substantially that of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." This poem, as we have said, was a central inspiration to Morris, defining for him the essential separation of imagination's dream from the reality of life. One can appreciate the persisting attraction which W. B. Yeats felt for Morris' romance: it reflects the infinite sadness of beauty, a theme which lay at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite inspiration. One is prompted to ask what was the father's specific criticism of Morris' poetry. Was it simply that Morris was repeating in muted fashion and at great length what Keats had achieved so fully and intensely in one short ballad? Inevitably this would be part of his criticism. But this, in itself, would be a pointless observation, and quite without purpose if he did not also propose that Keats' superiority lay in qualities of inspiration that Morris did not share. Simply comparing Keats' ballad to Morris' prose romance and holding the poem up as a model for emulation would be pointless; it was no model for his son's development as a poet, since its very perfection had made subsequent poetry of similar inspiration quite derivative, literary, and finally mannered. The Keats which J. B. Yeats would more reasonably propose as an example for experiment would be the Keats of the "Hyperion" poems.

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[69] Auto., p. 141.

These poems provided the example of the pure poet of sensation reaching out towards a more dramatic poetry, towards an achievement which would be at once both personal and objective. For the young Yeats who was "constantly troubled about philosophic questions" and who would ask himself "do the arts make us happier, or more sensitive and therefore more unhappy?...If I cannot be certain they make us happier I will never write again",[70] there was a humanitarian concern over his role as a poet. (We can also recall his passionate defence of Ruskin's Unto This Last as evidence of a definite social interest.) He would understandably respond to the "vision" of "The Fall of Hyperion" where Keats, hitherto the poet of revery and sensuous indolence, faces the more responsible Muse, Moneta. The approach to Moneta can be granted to none

> But those to whom the miseries of the world
> Are miseries, and will not let them rest.
> ("The Fall of Hyperion," I, 148-149)

If the "Hyperion" poems were proposed as examples of interest to his son who was precociously and somewhat histrionically self-conscious about the stages of his own development as a poet, then there would logically have ensued the consideration of why these poems were fragmentary, why, despite repeated efforts, they were never completed. Was their unfinished state the result of the inadequacy of the myth which Keats employed? The theme of Apollo's succession to the ancient reign of the Titans was perhaps subverted by the poet's imaginative exploration into the vast world of fallen Titans where Keats experienced that archaic mode of sensibility which his Apollo was intended to supplant. The young Yeats could not fail to be impressed by the parallel problem which he faced

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[70] Auto., p. 86.

in his ambitions to be a poet of Irish mythology which he felt to be a living, if slumbering, tradition. He had the certitude that Irish legend was a living presence, rooted in "rock and hill," to the very landscape of Ireland. Keats' essay into mythology was not as successful as his imaginative development of "folklore" (in the romances "Isabella" or "The Eve of St. Agnes") because, like Shelley's mythology, it did not have life in a community of belief. Shelley's Prometheus Unbound could not escape its atmosphere of "rootless fantasy," as Yeats expressed it, because a borrowed myth expressed psychic truths which lacked habitation in a living tradition.

Yeats' intention in "Oisin" was to present "incidents," not "states of mind," the journey along the three roads, not the "thicket at Howth" which they enclosed. He deliberately sought to employ a new style of epic simplicity. His inspiration, as his letters to Katherine Tynan tell us, was sustained in part by humanitarian hopes, and these, although usually related to Shelleyan idealism, were also the essential motivation behind Keats' purpose in writing "The Fall of Hyperion." The intention, however, does not define the performance, and "Oisin," if intended as an essay in the spirit of the "Hyperion" poems in effect rather suggests to the reader an Endymion. That Yeats was uncertain about the result is evident in his letters about the poem. Books One and Three of "Oisin" were considered "artistic" and well-executed; the second book, however, which so evidences the Keatsian influence, was felt to be "somewhat inarticulate" even "feverish" in its execution. Was it with Keats' letters in mind that Yeats formulated his criticism of the second book? "I have been no idle poetaster" he writes Katherine

Tynan in reference to the poem, and he goes on to state, "I have brayed in it youth and fellowship, peace and worldly hope."[71] A subsequent letter evidences his uneasiness about the execution: "The early poems I know to be quite coherent, and at no times are there clouds in my details, for I hate the soft modern manner. The clouds began about four years ago. I was finishing the 'Island'. They came and robbed Naschina of her shadow."[72] Is it with ironic appropriateness that he has in memory Keats' preface to Endymion?

> The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy: but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted; thence proceeds mawkishness...[73]

This passage, quoted in William Rossetti's preface to his 1872 edition of Keats' poems (a preface which extolled the greatness of the "Hyperion" poems), may well have been in Yeats' mind as a criticism of an overly-ambitious effort.

It remains to be asked whether the inclusion of so much Keats in the second book of "Oisin" was a deliberate part of the pattern of the whole poem. We must inquire now into the character of the general design which will throw light upon the "argument" proposed in the work. To return for a moment to the later references Yeats made about the style of "Oisin," we recall that these references were disparaging, and

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[71]Wade, p. 84.

[72]Wade, p. 88.

[73]The Poetical Works of John Keats, edited with a critical memoir by William Rossetti (London: E. Moxon, Son and Co., 1872), p. 2.

were employed to heighten a desired antithesis with a new concept of style (a familiar rhetorical device of the author of Autobiographies). The new style pursued was to be "as emotional as possible but with an emotion I described to myself as cold." If this is one measure of his later dissatisfaction with the poem, one can conclude that he later viewed it as having the faults of opposite qualities. "Oisin" was either emotional in a turbulent manner (not controlled and "cold") or else, and perhaps also, it was too theoretical and opinionated. Again in the Autobiographies we read that the new style was to cast off "traditional metaphors" and literary theory which was "alien and English." We can appreciate the fact that the theory of a new style which attended Yeats' appreciation of Ferguson's poetry could not be so readily put into practice, and that "Oisin" evidences a style which cannot escape its very English and "literary" environment. The general design and intention of the poem, which we must now consider, will be shown to be an expression of a newly-discovered enthusiasm for the Celtic and the revolutionary in a conceptual design which was romantic and literary.

In sending Oisin off to a third island Yeats has sent critics off on a search among Irish legends to justify this departure from the traditional legend. An early article by Alspach[74] remains the most thorough study of the Irish legendary sources for the poem. Since our purpose is to investigate an allegorical structure in the poem we are not directly concerned with the tracing of these sources. However,

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[74]Russell K. Alspach, "Some Sources For Yeats's 'The Wanderings of Oisin'", PMLA, LVIII (1943), pp. 849-866.

Alspach's study points up details of the poem which are obvious departures from major Irish sources and these we will consider since they may point to allegorical intention. It would seem to be likely that Yeats was concerned to have the sanction of Irish legend or what he considered to be traditional Irish literature for most, if not all, of the details in this carefully planned and researched work. However, the departure from the central legend and the conflation with other legends suggest that he was shaping his material with some freedom, and, within the choice possible from so many sources, he would have been able to select material to serve any number of allegorical schemes which he may have had in mind.

The two specific major departures from known sources which Alspach observes are: the three islands in place of the legend's mention of two, and the introduction of Mananan's Castle which does not occur in the legend, and which belongs to a pre-Fenian mythology. Possible sources for these differences are suggested. There is a tradition for three islands of Tir-nà-nOg, and the island of Forgetfulness could derive from various Sleeper legends, or from the old tradition of sleeping warriors who would one day awaken (a theme expressed in Katherine Tynan's "Waiting," 1885). The inclusion of Mananan's Castle is an instance of introducing a separate myth and possibly has its source, Alspach suggests, in R. D. Joyce's Deirdre and his Blanid which refer specifically to the sword and Castle of Mananan.

A presentation of available sources, however, does not explain the motive, but only the sanction, for their inclusion in the poem. The introduction of a third island may only have been prompted by an

intention to include more and varied material to build up the Oisin legend. However, the distinctness with which Yeats characterizes each island by the employment of different metres in a progressing pattern suggests that length and variety were not his only concern. And when one considers the pattern of gradation through the elements from fire to air to water to earth, which accompanies the lengthening of lines, and considers the pattern of the signs (spear shaft, beech bough, dead starling) which move Oisin onwards, we may suspect that a third island may have been required by Yeats to form the pattern of an allegory. When we analyze the character of the imagery associated with each island, which we will subsequently do, we discover that a pattern of decline is presented through bird imagery, the elements, heavenly bodies, colours, and minerals.

Such a pattern suggests that Yeats was concerned with presenting a progression of events and not an arbitrary sequence. We may ask what possible progressions might have interested him in the planning of this poem. The land of faery was obviously connected in Yeats' mind with the state of imagination and there is evidence that the poem was patterned as an imaginative journey with an induction, a companion muse, and a central vision. Could the progression present an allegorical pattern of Irish literature, or of English literature, or of some inclusive pattern of ages of poetry? We know from letters to Katherine Tynan that Yeats considered Book Two to be "symbolical" and Ellmann's noting that the chained lady whom Oisin frees signifies, in part, Ireland in English chains,[75] seems reasonable. An Irish poem might be

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[75]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 52.

expected to employ such political significance. But it seems then more probable that Yeats, who was no political activist, but rather viewed an Irish emancipation in artistic terms, would have seen that lady as much a muse in chains as a political figure. We can also recall Yeats' comment in the Autobiographies that he had dreamed of creating for Ireland "some new Prometheus Unbound" with possibly Oisin "in Prometheus' stead."

A Promethean Oisin would not only be too political a figure, he would also be too romantically imitative and too "literary," foreign to the intended Celtic character of the legend, and unworkable within the legend's plot. However, Yeats' reminiscence expressed in the Autobiographies describes the understandable hopes and ambitions of a young poet who knew he was helping to initiate a new movement in Irish literature. "Oisin" was to be a work looking forward to a renaissance, not one looking back to a dead past, a retreat sung by an idle singer of an empty day. Nothing would be more Irish, given the historic consciousness of the times, than to include in the plan of the poem an assessment of the condition of contemporary poetry which made a re-appreciation of heroic literature desirable. Indeed, the definition of the Celtic character of the poem to be relevant to a literary movement in the English language would require just such an assessment.

MacNeice's comment upon "Oisin" is typical of a prevalent critical attitude. The poem is "...very derivative...and no more Irish than Tennyson's Voyage of Maeldune...."[76] Undoubtedly Yeats desired to

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[76]Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 62.

achieve something of the high nonchalance of the legends and his performance falls short. But to read the poem simply as a failure, as a performance betrayed by a late romantic style, is to miss the allegorical intention pursued in the work. Granted that at the age of twenty-one the poet was inescapably under the influence of Morris, Tennyson, Keats and Shelley, we might ask if he employed this influence in a purposive manner. If we read the poem as an allegory of poetic ages, we can appreciate the fact that Yeats, by allegorical intention at least, transcends his own style. That such a reading is justified we will demonstrate, and that it makes the poem a much more interesting performance will be obvious.

Ellmann has recognized levels of allegory in the poem which Yeats said was "full of symbols." "Oisin"

> becomes a more interesting poem if Yeats' intentions in it are recognized...His most drastic modification of Comyn's account was turning the country of the young into three islands; he claimed for this the support of a tradition among the Irish peasantry, but the interpretations of the islands was his own. There are three islands of dancing, of victory, and of forgetfulness. On the personal level, they represent Yeats's idyllic boyhood at Sligo, his subsequent fights with the English boys in West Kensington because he was Irish, and his day-dreaming indolence at Howth. But these three stages in his life had wider implications, for they paralleled the periods of childhood, of aggressive maturity, and of senility in the lives of all men...He did not forget to connect the myth with his nation; the chained lady whom Oisin has to liberate in the second island bears a strong resemblance to Ireland in English chains, and Oisin's 'battles never done' suggest the never-ending Irish struggle for independence. Yeats wove his poem in a very tight web.[77]

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[77]Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (London: MacMillan, 1954), p. 18.

Ellmann goes on to note apparent inconsistencies:

> The poem is not, however, perfectly fused; sometimes the symbols and the narrative diverge from one another. So Oisin, who is living an heroic life with the Fenians, is induced to leave Ireland behind and go to the three islands. But the three islands, instead of being a refuge from life, are a symbolical representation of it. Oisin's nostalgia for the life he has left behind him is therefore inconsistent. Similarly a powerful contrast which Yeats draws in the poem between Oisin and Patrick as representatives of pagan and Christian Ireland, seems irrelevant to the timeless portrait of life on the three islands.[78]

These "inconsistencies" disappear if we understand the narrative design of the poem to be inspired by the new commitment to a public movement. In 1885, under the influence of O'Leary and O'Grady, Yeats had "decided that race was more important than the individual, and began...the Wanderings of Oisin."[79] The autobiographical nature of the poem is not limited to the presentation of stages in the poet's life, as a passive mirroring of stages of biography reflecting the universal human condition. Oisin, in the allegorical experiences of degrees of imaginative life, seeks an expansion and heightening of experience within the bounds of necessity. The apparent inconsistency between the islands understood as "a refuge from life" and Oisin's compulsion to return to reality disappears when we understand Yeats' perspective, which is concerned more with the "racial" than the "individual" point of view. Oisin's memories, which produce the conflict in his mind between the dream and the reality, are understandable as a theme of the life and the "work" which Yeats later developed to tragic intensity, but

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[78] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[79] "I Became An Author," The Listener (Aug. 4, 1938), p. 218.

Oisin in this poem moves under another compulsion. He responds to Yeats' direction of argument in the design of the poem: like Yeats who broadened his concern beyond "individual" perspective to emphasize the epic "racial" theme, Oisin is to be understood primarily as an instrument for Yeats' argument for an historical pattern. Oisin's progression through three islands advances the design of the poem to present the epochs of imaginative life. This is his function. It may also be noted that as a poet-figure his response to the repeated insistences of reality which draws him back from each dream is consistent with Yeats' recognition of his responsibilities at that time towards an ideal of a public literature. Oisin returns responsibly to a confrontation with Patrick, a confrontation which in 1885, Yeats believed, would reverse the earlier "historic" outcome, for history's cyclic necessity would now endorse what a previous epoch condemned. The vigour of the exchange between Oisin and Patrick (which Yeats' poem emphasizes and which Michael Comyn's poem, Yeats' major source for the myth, renders only in an elegaic tone) points towards the contemporary relevance of their antagonism and towards the renewal of Fenian values in present history. The "timeless portrait of life" which Ellmann over-emphasizes in his reading of the poem is in fact better understood as a portrait of time, that is, as "incidents" and not as "states of mind."

Whitaker's study of Yeats' evolving dialogue with history presents a reading of "Oisin" similar to Ellmann's:

> ...obscurities remained in The Wanderings of Oisin...Life on the three islands is not adequately correlated with the conflict between Oisin and Patrick; but that incoherence troubled Yeats's account of the cycle and the alternating eras in

> Blake, and was solved only by the complicated geometry of A Vision. Oisin's islands, too, are ambiguously a refuge from life and a mirror of it, and he is spurred on by strangely mingled longings--for Niamh, for the past, and for death.[80]

Whitaker recognizes the possibility that the three islands may reflect periods of history, but he minimizes the potential significance of this interpretation, limiting its relevance to a single literary source, Balzac's La Peau de Chagrin:

> Oisin's journey does suggest the cycle as found in La Peau de Chagrin. The harmonious tribal life of the island of the Living recalls Balzac's description of primitive social unity; the battle of Manannan's decaying tower on the Isle of Victoria may recall the ensuing social fragmentation; and the dreaming on the Isle of Forgetfulness may recall the substitution of the book for a sword, 'thought for its own sake'.[81]

Whitaker's analysis is concerned with the identification of Yeats' early understanding of his "dialogue with history," with "...a symbolic mode of cognition based upon an intuited affinity between creative mind and creative universe..."[82] His study employs the philosophy of a later Yeats to read logic into "Oisin," and from this point of view he actively collaborates with Yeats' intention in the Autobiographies and elsewhere to read "Oisin" as a largely unsuccessful prefiguration of a later wisdom. Thus, the "main historical elements" in the poem are seen only "dimly and fragmentarily, behind the excess of imagery and symbolism."[83]

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[80]Whitaker, p. 27.

[81]Whitaker, p. 22.

[82]Whitaker, p. 20.

[83]Whitaker, p. 25.

If the poem is read as a groping towards the philosophy of A Vision then much would seem unsatisfactory and obscure, and, for the critic pursuing an analysis of elements which adumbrate a later explicitness, much of the poem's symbolism must appear as excessive. Whitaker's study of the poem is deliberately limited to its significance as an early expression of later themes, and his study necessarily emphasizes what Yeats at the time of its composition was intent on subordinating; that is, the individual search as distinct from a social or racial vision of self-fulfillment. "Oisin" does indeed contain the antithetical relations in the individual's experience in the pattern of history, but the poem's "dialogue with history" has little of the subtleties or tragic ironies evident in Yeats' later experiences as a "last romantic," as a man out of phase with his age. "Oisin" brayed out hopes for the future, associated the individual search with an historically inevitable movement, and quite simply spent its energies for a cause which settled, temporarily, the self-questionings of such dialogues. This is not to say that the poem is simply a manifesto, a propagandist announcement. Its continued publication, albeit with revisions, is evidence enough that its complexity of design and its planes of allegory did survive Yeats' own later reservations about its association of individual with racial destiny. However, the new literary movement absorbed Yeats' imagination when he was writing the poem and his enthusiasm and involvement harmonized to a great extent those antitheses which a later poet, more experienced with life's bitter complexities, found to be more intractable.

We have previously considered the character of Yeats' expectations for the neo-romantic movement, and the contemporary urgency he experienced in advancing a cause against literary enemies who would retard its otherwise imminent realization as a national literature. We have insisted that Yeats' idealism at the time would not be satisfied with planning "Oisin" as merely a "counter-myth" to the hated progressivism of cosmopolitan literature. "Oisin" had to announce the new romantic movement by a return to an heroic literature which was, he believed, a living tradition in the countryside. The allegorical tendencies in Yeats' earliest verse which we have discussed in Chapter One were quickened when he found under O'Leary and O'Grady a theory of national literature against which he could more easily define his own relation to an English literary tradition. In adopting the "racial" theme and subordinating the "individual" Yeats was, in aesthetic terms, seeking an identification with an historical movement which would deliver him from the solipsist tendencies he recognized as dangerous to the growth of his art. The deliberate attempt to write with a "gusty energy" was his temporary solution to the persisting problem of a poetry of introspective self-questioning. In "Oisin" the allegorical handling of various styles is fully conscious and depends upon a general theory of literature, a theory which defined for Yeats the present historic "moment" as promising a "neo-romantic movement." The all-encompassing theory is prophetic and positive; it is a "counter-myth" which includes in its cyclic pattern the logic of a renewal of heroic values in literature and in the life of a nation.

The "counter myth" in "Oisin" itself derives from an English literary tradition, whose aesthetic theories and values were enlisted in the service of a new national literature. The "Irish" element in the poem which should receive emphasis is not the bardic sources for the myth of Oisin but rather the Irish voice of protest against entrenched, contemporary values in literature, especially the English influence upon Irish letters. When Yeats, in articles written just after the completion of the poem, presented the aims of his literary movement and attempted definitions of the values of the new poetry, he employed what we could call a protesting, negative definition. The Celtic values are the antithesis of middle-class philistine values of industrial England. In reaction to the oppressive reality of that philistinism he formulates his values antithetically. A typical example of such formulation appears in an article written early in 1889. The subject is the desirable quality of the Celtic spirit in poetry. There should be, says Yeats, "...no trying for effect, no rhetoric, no personal ambition, no posing... rather directness and sweetness...The Saxon is not sympathetic and self-abnegating...He is full of self-brooding..."[84] This passage from an article written for The Boston Pilot, whose readers were presumably Irish-Americans, no doubt was written with the audience's partiality in mind, but the passage is characteristic not only in method but also in its basic ideas.

The easy playing off of the "Celtic" against the "Saxon" suggests the simplifications of Arnold, whose essay on the Celtic element in

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[84]"The Children of Lir," reprinted in Letters to the New Island, p. 190.

literature was read favourably by Yeats. He grew to be more critical of Arnold's themes, but his essay "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1902) still accepts Arnold's romantic generalizations on that subject with little change, and the reference to Arnold's 1853 Preface in the essay "Art and Ideas" evidences an acceptance of the critic's analysis of the predicament of modern poetry: "Arnold when he withdrew his "Empedocles in Etna", though one had been sorry to lose so much lyrical beauty for ever, showed himself a great critic by his reasons..."[85] The 1853 Preface, with its condemnation of stultifying romantic melancholy and its enunciation of manful energy as necessary to a great poetry, was obviously attractive to Yeats. His later appreciation of the opposed values went beyond national or racial categories, but he found the distinctions between Celtic and Saxon useful to describe the struggle in the wider context of modern versus primitive culture. He interpreted Arnold's characterization of the Celtic to include all primitive cultures. Primitive cultures were equated with an heroic age. From the heroic a race or nation can only decline, and the unfortunate result is the modern man of whom the Saxon was an only too successful example.

If we consider that the planned literary movement for an Irish renaissance in literature had the character of contemporary urgency for Yeats, we can assume that an appreciation of the historic moment presupposed some evaluation of the historic past. A proclamation or a manifesto for the future requires, as dramatic background, a highly interpretive summary of the past. The aesthetic interpretation of

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[85]"Art and Ideas," Essays and Introductions, p. 354.

history, so manifest in Yeats' later work, probably had its origins early in his career. A Pre-Raphaelite milieu was nothing if not historically conscious and its habits of viewing history in aesthetic-social terms were influential, in principle at least. There were also many essays on the theme of ages of poetry which we know Yeats to have read, some of them written by poets and critics esteemed by him.

That Yeats was an inveterate formulator of social-aesthetic theories, and known for his sometimes esoteric theorizing by his contemporaries, is ironically referred to in an anecdote by Victor Plarr (in his book, Ernest Dowson).

> Mr. Yeats proposed that we should in future debate on poetry, and by way of beginning he made a speech pointing out that poetry had at one time passed through four stages which were, I think, the Diabolic, the Seraphic, the Celestial, and something else.[86]

This supposed reminiscence belongs to the period of the early 1890's during Yeats' association with The Rhymers Club. Less mystifying and earlier statements on the theme were written by Yeats in articles for The Boston Pilot and The New Providence Journal shortly after the publication of "Oisin." The topic is Irish literature, but the general pattern follows the classifications used by contemporary mythologists and is similar to Arnold's description of poetic decline from the Homeric to the hesitant lyrics of his self-conscious, estranged age. Writing in 1889 of Dr. Todhunter's "The Children of Lir," Yeats describes three periods:

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[86]Victor Plarr, Ernest Dowson (London: 1914), p. 30.

> His legends belong to those mythic and haunted ages of the Tuatha De Danaan that preceded the heroic cycle, ages full of mystery, where demons and gods battle in the twilight. Between us and them Cuchulain, Conall, Carnach, Conary...and the heroes move as before the gloomy arras.[87]

An article, "Ireland's Heroic Age," written in 1890 refers to its particular character: "The most imaginative of all our periods was the heroic age and the few centuries that followed it and preceded the Norman Invasion--a time of vast and mysterious shadows..."[88]

From the 1889 article reviewing Todhunter's book, Yeats' theme of literature's degeneration is presented. The judgement on the contemporary is evident:

> As a literature ages it divides nature from man and sings each for itself. Then each passion is taken from its fellows and sung alone, and cosmopolitanism begins, for passion has no nation. But in these poems [i.e.: Todhunter's] man and nature are one, and everywhere is a wild and pungent flavour.[89]

An exhortation for new poetry sustained by a rich Irish mythology is accompanied by an assessment of the worn-out, passionless character of English poetry. In an article of 1892 we read:

> May many follow the road Dr. Todhunter has chosen. It leads where there is no lack of subjects, for his literature of Ireland is still young, and on all sides of this road is Celtic tradition and Celtic passion crying for singers to give them voice. England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an almost finished banquet, but Ireland still has full tables.[90]

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[87] Letters to the New Island, p. 107.

[88] Ibid., p. 107.

[89] Ibid., p. 190. My brackets.

[90] Ibid., p. 148.

In all these articles there is the recurrent theme of a renaissance to be realized in the richness of Irish mythology and the concurrent theme of the pernicious influence of a degenerated English literature. The unmistakable note of an era ended and a new era to begin is everywhere repeated. Historic and aesthetic generalizations are restated with such conviction that a reader feels that Yeats thought "mythically" about the subject. His arguments, his "reasons," his exhortations, all are inspired by a belief which we might well call a personal myth. A myth on such a subject would have had an immense potential bearing upon the writing of "Oisin." And a myth is a form of persuasion which is readily adaptable to such a work of the imagination, written as we are told by the author with deliberate symbolic intent.

There is the possibility, of course, that these fervent convictions developed subsequently to the writing of "Oisin" (which was completed in late 1887, and revised somewhat before its late publication in 1889) but this seems unlikely. The passages quoted above were written immediately following his completion of the poem and can be considered as expressions of convictions which the labour of composing the poem delayed. We can assume that the zeal expressed in these articles accompanied and inspired the writing of "Oisin" and there would seem to be no reason why Yeats' ideas on ages of poetry were not well formulated even earlier. There is a tradition of apocalyptic hopes accompanied by a rejection of contemporary worn-out traditions in all the romantic poets, and these poets, especially Blake, Keats, Shelley, were the major literary influence upon Yeats. All proclaimed emancipation from the imagination-deadening "Grey Truth" of their times.

Shelley had propagated the idea of ages of poetry in his Defense of Poetry. Shelley's "ages" are presented as illustrations for his exposition as he considers the nature of poetry, the character of poets, and poetry's role in society. However, there are four definable epochs upon which his illustrations centre. There is the primordial epoch in "the youth of the world" when "men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm and order." In this age "all men are poets." There is the heroic or Homeric age (followed by the Athenian period which Shelley describes as the age which "stamped so visibly...the image of the divinity in man" but which can be considered in the more general classification which he employs to belong to the Homeric). Then there is the age of Dante which "may be considered as a bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world...Homer was the first and Dante the second epic poet: that is the second poet, the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge and sentiment and religion of the age..." If we proceed along the classification of epic, which genre Shelley relates to the poetic expression of the "knowledge sentiment and religion of the age," we have the Primordial, the Homeric, the Dantean and the Modern periods. The period of Dante is the period of the troubadour, of an emancipation of woman (an important Shelleyan theme), of romance, of the higher sensibility of love. The Modern period suffers through the increase of calculating reason which weakens the creative mind when "calculations have outrun conception" and when "The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has,

for want of the poetical faculty, proportionately circumscribed those of the internal world." The "owl-winged faculty of calculation" dominates the modern age. These four ages have been extricated from an essay whose subject is not primarily historical but philosophical; however, they are identifiable, indeed prominent, if the essay is read for the theme.

We may now briefly look at the appearance of the theme in a Hallam essay. The essay, "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson," was enthusiastically read by Yeats for its theory, which he felt justified his own favourite distinctions between kinds of poets. The essay's importance for Yeats is well attested in an article "A Bundle of Poets" in The Speaker (July 1893) and in the Essays and Introduction which places it as an early influence: "When I began to write I avowed for my principles those of Arthur Hallam in his essay on Tennyson."[91] The article's reference is equally forceful.

> If one set aside Shelley's essay on poetry and Browning's essay on Shelley, one does not know where to turn in modern English criticism for anything so philosophic--anything so fundamental and radical--as the first half of Arthur Hallam's essay...[92]

The "fundamental and radical" qualities refer to Hallam's distinction between poets of sensation and of reflection, which distinction is not of immediate concern here. The essay's "first half" does, however, explain this distinction in terms of the general condition of

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[91]"Art and Ideas," Essays and Introductions, p. 347.

[92]"A Bundle of Poets," The Speaker (July 22, 1893), p. 81.

contemporary poetry, and accounts for this, in turn, by observations upon an historical process: "But the age in which we live comes late in our national progress. That first raciness and juvenile vigour of literature...is gone, never to return. Since that day we have undergone a period of degradation..."[93] The romantic movement attempted to restore poetry from the "heresies of the Popean school...But repentance is unlike innocence; the laborious endeavour to restore has more complicated methods of action than the freedom of untainted nature..."[94] The modern situation is typically characterized, "...several component functions" replacing the original "intrinsic harmony."

It is the note of particularity, of discussing England's national literature, that distinguishes the tone of this essay from Shelley's. The malaise of contemporary English poetry is described:

> Hence the melancholy which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry; hence that turn of the mind upon itself and the habit of seeking relief in idiosyncracies rather than community of interest. In the old times the poetic impulse went along with the general impulse of a nation; in these, it is in reaction against it...[95]

This critical essay can be matched point for point with Yeats' themes presented previously. The Celtic world of Yeats' imagination, young, vigorous, direct and passionate, is simply the antithesis of Hallam's description. The sense of a dead-end in the English tradition promotes the belief in a renaissance in the Irish. Even the supposed advantages

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[93]Arthur Hallam, The Writings of Arthur Hallam, edited by T. H. Vail Motter (New York: The MLA, 1943), p. 189.

[94]Hallam, p. 190.

[95]Hallam, p. 190.

of England would make Ireland's deficiencies seem a blessing. Hallam refutes the contention that material progress and its attendant leisure should encourage "progress" in poetry: "But this notable argument forgets that against this objective amelioration may be set the decrease of subjective power..."[96]

That Yeats had identified and defined the present opportunity for a new literature by a clearly formulated theory of epochs of imaginative life is quite evident from a reading of his articles in Dublin newspapers during the early 1890's. The persistence of the theme can be noted, and its appropriateness as the governing logic of the structure of "Oisin" seems indisputable. In an article "Hopes and Fears For Irish Literature," published in United Ireland in October of 1892, Yeats discusses the poets of the Rhymers' Club for whom "Poetry is an end in itself; it has nothing to do with thought, nothing to do with philosophy, nothing to do with life..."[97] He recalls the first meeting of the group in the previous year when he, the poet of "Oisin," presented his theories on poetry:

> I well remember the irritated silence that fell upon a noted gathering of younger English imaginative writers once, when I tried to explain a philosophy of poetry in which I was profoundly interested, and to show the dependence, as I conceived it, of all great art and literature upon conviction and upon heroic life.[98]

Yeats' "profound interest" in his philosophy survived the scepticism and

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[96]Hallam, p. 190.

[97]"Hopes and Fears For Irish Literature," United Ireland (Oct. 15, 1892), p. 5.

[98]Ibid., p. 5.

sophistication of the Rhymers; its slow formulation during the 1880's gave it the character of a myth, and its hold upon his mind was not to be easily dislodged by sceptical silence. He continued to promote its implications in speeches to literary gatherings in Ireland. An unsigned notice in the January 23, 1892 issue of United Ireland reveals the outline of Yeats' speech on "Nationality and Literature" given a few days earlier. The topic, a reporter writes, was

> ...the connection which should exist between nationality and literature. Literature he said had its periods of youth, manhood, and old age. Irish literature is still in the period of great and hopeful youth, that of England has passed the stage of vigorous development and is gliding into its era of old age.[99]

Yeats' evaluation of his immediate Irish tradition and its characteristic literary forms is sketched out: "To such writers as Sir Samuel Ferguson, of the ballad-epic school, and Aubrey de Vere who, though he had written much on epic subjects, belongs more to the period of the subjective lyric, the lecturer gave high praise."[100] The most explicit formulation of Yeats' theory was published the following year in the same newspaper. The article, entitled "Nationality and Literature,"[101] begins with the characteristic method of defining the historic moment for Irish literature by a contrast with English literature. Matthew Arnold is again invoked for his popular and flattering sentiments on the Celtic qualities and for his social generalizations.

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[99]From an unsigned notice in United Ireland (Jan. 23, 1892), p. 5.

[100]Ibid., p. 5.

[101]"Nationality and Literature," United Ireland (May 27, 1893).

> If I were addressing an English audience I would not venture to use the word philosophy, for it is only the Celt who cares much for ideas which have no immediate practical beauty. At least Matthew Arnold has said so, and I think he is right, for the flood-gates of materialism are only half-open among us yet here in Ireland; perhaps the new age may come before the tide is quite upon us.

The epic sweep of the theory is evident.

> I wish to separate the general course of literary development and set it apart from mere historical accident and circumstances, and having done so, to examine the stages it passes through and then to try and point out in what stage the literature of England is, and in what stage the literature of Ireland is... it is necessary to find...this general law of development...

Elaborating a simile comparing the growth of an indigenous literature to that of a tree (a simile which is prominently developed in Hallam's essay also), Yeats goes on to argue the necessary law of growth, and warns against the dangers of an unnatural acceleration towards "maturity" through an uncritical acceptance of an English literary influence. Irish literature "...must go through these periods no matter how greatly we long for finality." The temptation for "finality," a curiously absolute and dramatic term, may reflect Yeats' own ambivalent attitude towards the dying English and European traditions whose decline was now beginning to be dramatized by him as an exciting, perhaps apocalyptic, hurrying into "finality." The three ages of a nation's literature are defined: "First the period of narrative poetry, the epic or ballad period, next the dramatic period: and after that, the period of lyric poetry..." The process is one of progression from the society of a nation "in which men live," to the loose society of powerful individuality, to the fragmented abstractions of a lyric age. In

English literature the process follows from the "epics" of Arthur, to the Elizabethan dramatists, to the Romantics where "poets began to write but little of individual men and women, but rather of great types, great symbols of passion and of moods like Alastor, Manfred..." Yeats' characterization of the late romantic period evidences the influence the Rhymer poets had in defining for him what was evidently a dangerous attractiveness:

> In the lyric age the poets no longer can take their inspiration mainly from external activities and from what are called matters of fact for they must express every phase of human consciousness no matter how subtle, how vague, how impalpable. With this advancing subtlety poetry steps out of the market place, out of the general tide of life and becomes a mysterious cult, as it were, an almost secret religion made by the few for the few.

The modern attempts at epic or drama in English literature are written in the face of their historical phase (and it is perhaps with the very English influence evident in "Oisin" in mind that Yeats makes this observation about a modern rendering of epic legends): "The old simplicity has grown out of them and an often great obscurity has come in its stead. The form of Browning is more commonly than not dramatic and epic, but the substance is lyrical." Modern poets who essay an epic manner (he speaks of Hugo, Goethe, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Browning) have one common "peculiarity" which Irish poets have no occasion to share: "They more often than not go to foreign countries for their subjects; they are in fact citizens of the world, cosmopolitans."

The problems of the contemporaneity of an old English literature and a youthful Irish literature are recognized, but Yeats, in this

article addressed to the popular reader, does not dwell upon the complexities of tangential influences between the different cycles sharing a common language. The relatively simple idealism behind the planning of "Oisin" had doubtlessly been complicated by the experience of writing that poem and by the reviews it received; and Yeats had by 1893 absorbed a good deal of the aestheticism of the Rhymer poets which complicated his theories of style: he maintained his vision of an epic subject matter, but recognized, as we shall later discuss, certain aesthetic ideals which were more appropriate to lyric poetry than to the bold outline of epic. He concludes his analysis of ages of poetry, however, in a purposive manner: "Look on our literature and you will see that we are still in our epic or ballad period...Alone perhaps among the nations of Europe we are in our ballad or epic age." That the youthfulness of the nation's literature may also be the wave of the future when other literatures have ebbed out their remaining years is just suggested:

> If time and fit occasion offered, I could take you upon the path, beaten by the feet of the seers, and show you behind human society and human life the causal universe itself, 'falling' in the words of my master, William Blake, 'into division', and foretell with him 'its resurrection into unity.'[102]

That fall into division had been represented in the allegory of "Oisin." The communal life of the first island falls into the division and strife of the second, and finally into the near solipsistic revery of the third. The "resurrection into unity," albeit an embattled unity, in both the social and individual senses was symbolically enacted in the

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[102] Ibid. All passages quoted are from page one of this issue.

freeing of the chained figure and in the recurring victory over the demon on the second island. This demon, understood in a literary sense, is alternately a muted, melancholy lyricist, and, when aroused, a mad Hectorer. His rule is alien and is out of phase with the youthful muse of the Irish "ballad or epic age" whom Oisin frees.

To what extent Blake was an important influence on "Oisin" is extremely difficult to determine. Yeats became a serious student of that poet only after the completion of the poem. We know that he had read Blake earlier with interest and approval, although probably without systematic study.[103] What can be stated without doubt is that Blake was one of the "allies for my secret thought" substantiating the Hermetic and Theosophical lore which he read intensively from 1885 on, the year when he first began the poem. Our study of the poem lays emphasis upon its motivation, its governing theories, and its contemporary significance; and the impulse and general theory behind the poem are, we argue, central to its understanding. The assessment of origins for the symbolism of the poem in Blake is really another subject, one pursued by Adams, Whitaker, and Bloom along others, and it is a subject which, as we have repeatedly said, inevitably measures the success of poems like "Oisin" in terms of their adequacy in expressing the Blakeian vision. Harold Bloom's assessment gives such emphatic priority to an orthodoxy of "vision" that he interprets Yeats as a betrayer of a visionary company, as a poet who "deliberately misunderstood" both Blake and Shelley. Again, in terms of Blake, Adams announces that Yeats promoted a "false dualism" which gives his poetry a somewhat factitious drama. Whitaker

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[103]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 65.

attempts to begin and end with Yeats' sensibility, but his able appreciation of the growth of Yeats' double vision (his dialogues with history) attempts an organization of early Yeats in terms of a later system. We have tried to keep our perspective centered in Yeats' sensibility and his preoccupations at the time of composition, deeming such a perspective to be essential for an understanding of the poem's contemporary significance. By defining Yeats' aesthetic problems and the literary tradition which gave him both theme and a framework for organization, we have deliberately limited our appreciation to the limitations of the author's "vision" at the time.

To organize the rather free eclectic gathering of Yeats' occult symbolism in the poem and read it as a departure from, or an adumbration of, some designated standard (be it the system of Blake, or of Theosophy) is to leave our subject, and is unnecessary if our identification of the central theories behind the poem is accepted. For the selection of symbols was determined by their usefulness in elaborating determined themes, themes which did not depend themselves upon other "systems." There is no difficulty in suggesting sources for the symbols, but there is no end to the finding of parallels and correspondences in "esoteric" literature, and since we do not seek a governing discipline in a system we may simply note some of the more obvious "allies" for the poem's arguments.

Yeats' own statement in a letter to Ernest Boyd discounts the influence of Hermetic or Theosophical symbolism in his early poems:

> No, my early poems as far as I know had nothing to do with the Hermetic Society. The original body in Dublin was not the Theosophical but an earlier

> Hermetic Society founded by myself and a few friends in 1884 or thereabouts. Then came a theosophical society and the later Hermetic Society. My interest in mystic symbolism did not come from Arthur Symons or any other contemporary writer. I have been a student of the mediaeval mystics since 1887 and found in such authors as Valentin Andrea authority for my use of the rose.[104]

We might view this statement with circumspection. Yeats' generalized references to "Oisin," as we have considered them, are certainly open to a more critical and searching interpretation. Wade's comment on this letter points out a more specific source for Yeats' knowledge of "mediaeval mystics":

> Johann Valentine Andreae or Andreas (1586-1654), a German theologian and mystic. As his books were written either in German or Latin it seems unlikely that Yeats studied them intensively. He is perhaps referring to a book ascribed to Andreas, The Hermetic Romance or the Chymical Wedding, written in High Dutch by C(hristian) R(osenkrenz), translated by E. Foxcroft, London 1690. This was reprinted in The Real History of the Rosicruceans by A. E. Waite, 1887.[105]

There are indeed similarities between the dream allegory of the "Chymical Wedding" and the sequence of incidents presented in Book Two of "Oisin," and these we will consider later. Other occult literature read during the planning of the poem may have encouraged a systematic use of symbols but such literature, we argue, did not provide sources, and if influential, was not a governing discipline for the poem. Hermetic correspondences and the general patterns presented in Sinnett's and Madame Blavatsky's books were, at most, corroborative evidence for Yeats' literary theories. He differed from his friend Charles Johnston

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[104]Wade, p. 592. Dated Feb. 1915.

[105]See Wade's commentary, p. 592.

in that he was never a whole-hearted convert to any system; such disciplines were "allies," useful for the young poet whose general strategy in "Oisin" was already formulated.

There is another reason for Yeats' probably circumspect use of occultism. The credibility of Madame Blavatsky and the whole Theosophical Society of which she was the central figure was thrown into question. A Richard Hodgson investigated Sinnett's popularized account of Mme. Blavatsky's miraculous powers. This investigation, sponsored by the Society For Psychical Research, resulted in Hodgson's report of fraudulent practices and shook the belief, real or "imaginative" of many hopeful converts. Charles Johnston's reaction to the report was chivalrous: he declared that Madame Blavatsky was the persecuted object of a conspiracy and he asked Yeats and George Russell, among others, to join him in the establishment of a Dublin lodge. Both demurred, Yeats "had lost his confidence"[106] and later, during the spring and summer of 1887 (when Book One of "Oisin" was completed and Book Two being written) his association with the Theosophical Society in London was marked by a circumspect curiosity. He was attracted by the personality of Mme. Blavatsky but his scepticism about the movement was pronounced. When, in 1888, after "Oisin" was completed, he joined the Esoteric Section of the society, it was with the intention of "proving" by empirical method the claims or expectations of its adherents. Ellmann has published excerpts from Yeats' journal written in 1888, and further investigation of this record (now in the National Library in Dublin) confirms the fact that the system of correspondences drawn up by the young poet in that

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[106]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 64.

year had only the most general relation to the pattern of symbols in "Oisin." For example, the descending order of the "Four Elementary States" are similar to the symbolic use of elements in the poem, and the correspondences of seasons, colours, and elements tabled on one page in the journal present an organization of elementary associations commonly evidenced in poetic imagery. They are not arcane correspondences. Where the theosophical influence is prominent in other tables, as for example in the table which includes colour correspondences under the heading "Esoteric colour," their sequence is quite at odds with the traditional sequence of the spectrum which Yeats employed in "Oisin."[107] Yeats' notebook (now in the National Library, Dublin), presents this table of correspondences.

		Esoteric colour
SATURN	Knees, bones, right ear	green
JUPITER	Left ear, thighs, feet, arteries	light blue
MARS	Forehead to nose, sex organs	red
SUN		orange
VENUS	Chin, cheeks, neck nervous system	yellow-indigo
MERCURY	Mouth, hands, stomach	ivory, cream, yellow
MOON	Breast, left eye, saliva	violet.

The sequence of colours in the spectrum which Yeats employed has no relation to this sequence. Speculation upon a possible pattern of symbolism in "Oisin" on the parts of the body is prompted by Yeats' use of unusual imagery such as in lines 391 and 392 of Book One,

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[107]National Library, Dublin, Yeats MS. 13, 570.

Each forehead like an obscure star
Bent down above each hooked knee

where Saturn and Mars on the above chart would seem to be connected (and point forward towards the warlike action of Book Two). But no pattern is evident. The image is either irrelevant or it may have depended upon a stray association. Certain enthusiasms in Sinnett's books, particularly the emphasis upon the progressive development of eras of consciousness, were not in all probability of interest to the young poet who was intent on writing a "counter-myth" to the general Victorian myth of progress and who entertained a dramatic hope for an apocalyptic reversal or return to the primitive vigour of early Irish literature. But as a romantic who had deliberately decided to find his "self" in a commitment to "racial" themes, he could not fail to be impressed by the pattern formulated by Sinnett in his Esoteric Buddhism, a pattern which so impressed his friend Charles Johnston. For Johnston, "The entire reasonableness of the account there given of the life and growth of the soul, interwoven with the history of the world, came home with convincing force..."[108] The elaborate metaphor of a breaking wave and the idea of the ebb and flow of historical epochs were as Yeats says "obsessive" during the composition of the poem.[109] There was much in Sinnett's books to encourage such obsessive preoccupation, for the metaphor seems obsessive to that author. There are repeated expressions

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[108]Quoted by Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 61. Two of A. P. Sinnett's books which Yeats read in earlier editions are: Esoteric Buddhism, Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Riverside Press, 1890, and The Occult World, London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1921.

[109]Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 68.

of the "wave of evolution," "the human tide-wave," "the alternate succession of activity and repose," but these are purposive and progressive rhythms in Sinnett's books; they are dialectical and suggest neither the apocalyptic sense of reversal in Yeats' poem nor the dialogue of interpenetrating gyres which the ebb and flow obsession in his poem adumbrates.

We need, I think, look no further than Arnold's "Dover Beach" to find the thematic importance of this rhythm in Yeats' mind. The ebbing tide which exposed the "naked shingles" of a desiccated spiritual condition was, for Yeats, to be followed with a "flood" tide of renewal in the primitive vigour of Celtic inspiration. Arnold, once again, had described (in his essay on Celticism) the "flood" of inspiration which Macpherson's Ossian had on European literature, and Yeats under the direct inspiration of O'Grady and O'Leary, with a histrionic sense of the moment, was convinced that time and place were propitious for such a renewal.

CHAPTER IV

"THE WANDERINGS OF OISIN"

Professor Bloom's recent book on Yeats presents this poem as a romantic's "internalized quest" and the figure of Niamh a "temptress" muse. In it, says Bloom, Yeats "descends into the Shelleyan vortex"[1] and by the poem's conclusion has embraced "the questor's natural defeat as a victory, not of Prometheus or Blake's rebel Orc, but of a man divided against himself, natural against the imaginative, neither capable of final victory over the other."[2] We have argued that the Alastor theme had been a conscious subject of Yeats' poetry well before "Oisin," and while we recognize that the fatal attractiveness of the "vortex" is recurring (just as the battle with the demon in Book Two of "Oisin" is recurrent) we have stated that Yeats had presented an exorcism of that temptress muse in the unflattering figure of the "bearded witch" in "The Seeker." The whole concept behind "Oisin," we have further argued, gives emphasis to the racial theme, and the "quest" is better understood as an allegory of purposive design in which the romantic poet finds his identification through a deliberate acceptance of a role in a new literary movement. The matter of emphasis is important, and the poet's conscious intentions as we have defined them should be given some

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[1]Harold Bloom, Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 96.

[2]Bloom, p. 102.

consideration, otherwise we read the poem as a passive enactment or a willful celebration of the very romantic subjectivism from which we claim Yeats had in earlier poetry and was, in this poem, desiring deliberate emancipation. We have, further, proposed that while the Alastor problem is indigenous to Yeats (and is not "written off" in "The Seeker") the Muse figure which Niamh leads Oisin to in the second island is better understood as a Moneta, a Muse of the external quest. Ironically, if we are to see Niamh as the "temptress," she may just as readily be understood as the temptation towards politics or the "business" of promoting a literary school, all those activities which could "tempt" Yeats from the "craft of verse."

Niamh's appeal in this poem, which includes an autobiographical plane of meaning, is in one sense an imaginative temporary escape from the limitations of nature. In this we would agree with Bloom. One hundred years of ecstatic song on the first island extends the bliss of brief Sligo boyhood, but necessity moves Oisin on towards the inevitable return to "earth" and bodily decrepitude. The imagination, as here interpreted, simply extends and heightens memory and desire, and must finally die into the fact of human life. But this individual necessity mirrors the larger pattern of the racial cycle, and the "land of youth" is a present historic phase in Ireland (so Yeats would argue, if certain demons were industriously battled) and a poet's lifetime, if he gave his life to this larger cycle, could participate in the youthful vigour and freshness of the "racial" life.

The relationship between Oisin and Niamh is best illustrated by a

comparison to Michael Comyn's poem[3] which Yeats has designated as one important source for his work. In response to a query by a reviewer of "Oisin" in The Spectator (July 27, 1889) Yeats wrote the editor:

> ...your reviewer asks where I got the material for The Wanderings of Oisin. The first few pages are developed from a most beautiful old poem by one of the numerous half-forgotten Gaelic poets who lived in Ireland in the last century. In the quarrels between the saint and the blind warrior, I have used suggestions from various ballad dialogues of Oisin and Patrick, published by the Ossianic Society. The pages dealing with the three islands are wholly my own, having no further root in tradition than the Irish peasant's notion that Tir-n-an-age (the Country of the Young) is made up of three phantom islands.[4]

Comyn's poem begins with a polite, even pleasant, exchange between Oisin and Patrick. There follows a lengthy description of Niamh, then Niamh's description of the delights of the Land of Youth. The departure to Tir-nà-nOg is next lengthily described, and then follows the battle with the giant "Formor of the Blows" and the freeing of a captive princess. Subsequently, the Land of Youth is described, and then the poem concludes with a long description of the return to Ireland.

Yeats' "Oisin" differs in the particulars pointed out in the quoted letter, and in other important ways. In place of Comyn's ballad measure, Yeats employed three stanzaic forms, giving emphasis to the distinctive character of the three islands of experience. Comyn's giant Formor appears in Yeats' poem as a demon of distinct literary associations which another of Yeats' innovations, the introduction of Mananan's usurped

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[3]Michael Comyn, "The Lay of Oisin in the Land of Youth," trans. Brian O'Looney, An Anthology of Irish Literature, ed. David H. Greene (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1954).

[4]Wade, p. 132.

castle, makes particularly significant. Finally, the relationship of Oisin to Niamh Yeats presents as a literary dedication, a dedication which argues that the experiences of the three islands are not intended as a willing descent into the "Shelleyan vortex" but rather are a conscious allegory of epochs of imaginative life which define the external conditions for a neo-romantic movement. A portion of Comyn's poem must be quoted. Comyn's Niamh addresses Finn, Oisin's father:

> His name, O Finn, then I'll declare--
> 'Tis thy famed son, so fair, so brave
> Oisin the warrior, Erin's bard,
> My fair reward for crossing the wave.
>
> Then why hast thou hastened to give thy love,
> O maiden above all maids most fair--
> To Oisin my own beyond all known
> Of princes high both rich and rare?
>
> Good cause I ween for my course shall be seen,
> O King of the Fian, when I tell thee truth.
> Oisin's high deeds and noble name
> Have won him fame in the Land of Youth.
>
> Full many a prince of high degree
> Hath offered me both heart and hand;
> But who so appealed, I ne'er did yield
> But my heart kept sealed for my hero grand.
>
> Oisin O Patrick stern, how my soul did yearn
> And with ardour burn for the peerless maid--
> No shame to tell--each word was a spell,
> That bound me well past mortal aid.
>
> I took her gentle hand in mind
> And with every sign of love I said
> 'Welcome a hundred thousand times
> From fairy climes, O royal maid.
>
> Of woman, the rarest, fairest seen
> Thou art O Queen without compeer!
> My soul, my life, my chosen life,
> Star of my way of ray most clear.[5]

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[5]Comyn, p. 108.

In Comyn's verse Oisin is principally a warrior, and it is his "high deeds" not his fame as "Erin's bard" which has attracted Niamh. Similarly, Oisin's response is simply a recognition of Niamh's beauty. Yeats' rendering of the exchange between the lovers is markedly different. Niamh has been drawn to Oisin by his "song."

> "Good reason have I for my love,"
> She said, "for he is fair above
> All men, and stronger of his hands
> And drops of honey are his words
> And glorious as Asian birds
> At evening in their rainless lands
> Full many bowing Kings besought me
> And many princes of high name
> I ne'er loved any till song brought me
> To peak and pine o'er Oisin's fame."
> There was, oh Patrick, by thy head
> No limb of me that was not fallen
> In love. I cried, "Thee will I wed,
> Young Niam, and thou shalt be callen
> Beloved in a thousand songs." ("Oisin," 1889 text, I, 62-76)

In Yeats' presentation, Oisin is primarily a poet and an autobiographical poet-figure whose "songs" before he dedicated himself to Irish themes were "Asian" and exotic. The declaration of a new allegiance is conscious, deliberate, and public, and the tacit renunciation of "Asian" settings, sea-engirt islands of Shelleyan subjectivity, challenges Bloom's reading of Niamh as a subjective's muse. The "wedding" proposed will have its allegorical consummation in the emancipatory theme of Book Two. Comyn's Fomorian demon is simply a "giant grim" and his chained maiden only a figure in the romance's narrative. She is an object to be freed, and once freed, is disposed of as a narrative figure with appropriate sentiment:

> Sad, sorrowful the leave we took
> And sad the maiden's look, I wot.

> The further fate of that sweet maid,
> O Patrick staid, I could not tell
> No word of her I've heard one say
> E'en since the day we said Farewell.[6]

Yeats' maiden is an allegorical figure to whom Oisin cannot say "farewell." No leave is taken of her, for she has become the image of emancipation.

Niamh's appearance in the finally revised version retains her romantic genealogy; she is a Belle Dame in the Pre-Raphaelite manner,

> A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
> On a horse with bridle of findrinny;
> And like a sunset were her lips,
> A stormy sunset on doomed ships,
> A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
> But down to her feet white vesture flowed,
> And with the glimmering crimson glowed
> Of many a figured embroidery; (I, 20-27)

The original version presents her not only as a highly desirable companion, one whom a later Yeats describes as motivation enough to lead Oisin and Yeats "by the nose...starved for the bosom of his fairy bride," but also as a muse figure. The original version of "Oisin" has as its theme the imaginative life; in retrospect, Yeats, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," reduces the poetry to vain allegories of frustrated love. But bodily decrepitude has only its relative wisdom, and to read "Oisin" from Yeats' later posture is to miss the reality it had in its moment of composition. Revisions have removed details which point to Niamh's function as a muse, possibly because Yeats may have wished to disguise an allegory where he had "brayed out" too ambitious hopes. Niamh's original line "Mount my white steed for the fairy state" is an induction into an imaginative "state" of mind, on the white, winged

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[6]Comyn, p. 118.

horse, Pegasus. This is not Irish, and a revision rectifies this and suppresses the original idea of Pegasus: "And many a mile is the fairy state." A sense of spatial distance is thus introduced. The final revision completely disguises any suggestion of a poet's imaginary journey: "Music and love and sleep await" (I, 103). Similarly revisions make Niamh's appeal more physical. "And Niamh be with you for a wife" (I, 101) replaces the more literary but revealing line "And floating-haired and proud in strife" (1889 text, I, 99) which in close proximity to the offer of "honey and milk" suggests "Kubla Khan" and its state of poetic enthrallment. Revisions do not change, however, the autobiographical directness of Niamh's appeal as an Irish muse to the poet Yeats in her address to Oisin, whose songs "...are like coloured Asian birds/At evening in their rainless lands" (I, 69-70). Yeats' poetry previous to the undertaking of "Oisin" was dominated by exotic Indian settings. His answer to Niamh is that of a poet answering his new Irish muse, "And I will make thee a thousand songs/And set your name all names above" (I, 75-76). Oisin, in the original edition, is quite consciously presented as a poet-figure.

Having arrived at the island of joyous song and dancing, Oisin is given a harp to play; but when he

> ...sang of human joy
> A sorrow rapt each merry face (I, 234-235)

for human joy is faery sorrow in Irish tradition, and the theme that is developed in the poem expresses the antithesis of dream haunting the life, and life the dream. But, moreover, Oisin's song of his Fenian world (the heroic-romantic world of Book Two) is woefully deficient in

the imaginative life of this island where song and dance express a joy of present existence. Songs of hope or memory do not belong to this state of imagination where present delight is the only theme. The harp is hurled into a pool, and Yeats leaves behind the lyric of romantic desire to join in a chorus of song.

The theme of the degrees of imaginative life and their historical ages is evident in Aengus' song which presents the idea of a Platonic descent of men's souls, once "drops of flame" from the "saffron morning," into the "narrow caves" of matter. The process of an imaginative decline, like a fading coal, as Oisin moves from island to island, is foreshadowed by Aengus' song. From this island of fire Oisin will move to the airy towers built on the foam of the sea in the second island, to the dew drenched earth of the third island and thence to the sack of sand which spills out his years at one rush.

On Aengus' island, in the condition of free imagination, joy is God, for there is no bounding necessity. In this condition the dancers can sing "neither Death nor Change come near us" because in the fullness of their joy they experience the psychological state of Eternity. Their minds have not yet invented death. The singers mock the stars overhead.

> ...you slaves of God
> He rules you with an iron rod,
> He holds you with an iron bond. (I, 331-333)

The "iron bond" (which becomes the "iron sleep" of the third island under its malign starlight) is possibly a parody of Wordsworth's eulogy to "geometric truth"

> ...that held acquaintance with the stars
> And wedded soul to soul in purest bond
> Of reason... (The Prelude, V, 103-105)

The "iron bond" of materialistic science was an old antipathy for Yeats. In his teens he had read Professor Tyndall's popular lectures on the "iron necessity" of materialism where spirit and free will are illusions of mankind bound fast in fate.[7] Yeats, two months after the publication of "Oisin," in a letter to Katherine Tynan refers to Laura Armstrong (a youthful infatuation) appreciating her role in awakening him from a Newtonian sleep of death: "She woke me from the materialistic sleep of science and set me writing my first play."[8] He shared with A. E. and Charles Johnston Madame Blavatsky's definition in The Secret Doctrine of modern European nations "falling into their Iron Age."[9] The unalterable law of Victorian science and its consequent morality are mocked by Yeats' defiant dancers. "God is joy and joy is God" they sing, and the dance's rout exhibits a freedom from the stable order of stars, which, "Like bubbles frozen in a pond," are in contrast to the "unchainable" hearts "that know no law nor rule." The satire on "Wordsworthianism" is probably specifically directed towards one of Dowden's sonnets whose

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[7]John Tyndall, "Science and Man" in his Lectures and Essays: Cullings From 'Fragments of Science' (London: Watts and Co., 1903). This paper, originally delivered in 1877, considers the idealism of Fichte as a reaction to the objectivity of science. Tyndall reviews Fichte's solution to the modern dilemma: "To escape from iron necessity seen everywhere reigning in physical nature, he turned defiantly round upon nature and law, and affirmed both of them to be products of his own mind. He was not going to be the slave of a thing he himself had created. There is a good deal to be said in favour of this view, but few of us probably would be able to bring into play the solvent transcendentalism whereby Fichte melted his chains." p. 87.

[8]Wade, p. 117.

[9]"I think Great Britain and France are falling into their Iron Age as old 'H.P.B.' prophesied they would in The Secret Doctrine." Some Passages From the Letters of AE to W. B. Yeats (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1946), p. 55.

title and theme is "Joy." Dowden's sestet defines quite clearly that mental condition which Yeats' dancers scorn:

> But Joy
> Is stable; is discovered law; the birth
> Of dreadful light; life's one imperative way;[10]

The image of bonded stars seems to have been an obsessive one with the young poet. A notebook dated October 1886 (now in the National Library, Dublin) containing the first known draft of Book One of "Oisin" has a sketch on its front cover of stars bonded by connecting lines. On the inside cover are two quatrains which reveal Yeats' brooding on the idea of human truth as opposed to scientific law, the theme which Book One of the poem elaborates. There is the pencilled quatrain,

> Things swamp themselves in this our modern day
> For we have reasoned all our truths away
> Law lost neath pyramids of Law lies low
> We smiled away our smiling long ago.[11]

The theme is familiar enough, but some of the details in the verse, written during the time when Yeats wrote his defense of Ferguson and his attack on Dowden, may point towards Dowden as a convenient personification of the modern reasoner. Is he the smiler behind the last line? In the Autobiographies Dowden is remembered for his ironic smile of patronizing indulgence. Are the pyramids simply an appropriate metaphor for the mechanical intelligence which raises a tomb over the free spirit, or do they too relate to the figure of speech which Dowden elaborated on in a letter to Todhunter some years earlier and which Yeats may have heard from Dowden himself? In his letter, Dowden develops an observation

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[10]Dowden, Poems, p. 81.

[11]National Library, Dublin, Yeats MS. 3726.

on Todhunter's house building into a metaphoric description of his own literary labours. There is an extended analogy to a critic's pyramid building. "I have just enough force to lift the great stones for my pyramid where I shall soon lie swathed....If I die a dilettante, it shall be a dilettante in pyramids."[12] Dowden, no doubt, smiled away in Yeats' studio his industrious task of literary criticism as a pre-occupation which, as J. B. Yeats flatteringly asserted, stifled his creative talents.

The other quatrain is Shelleyan in diction and in theme, and presents sorrow as the vitiating modern disease against which the ode to joy in Book One of "Oisin" is asserted.

> Sorrow is sapping all the bonds of men
> When they shall long for neither life nor death
> The worlds will fade like vapours o'er a fen
> Before annihilation's rapturous breath.[13]

The songs of these joyous dancers addressed deliberately and separately to the dewdrop, to the waves, and to the stars, proclaim an independence within nature, and a self-sufficiency that is the heroic opposite of the forlorn dependency of the sad shepherd's world, whose "song" was similarly addressed to stars, waves, and dewdrops. The world of this island presents "the youth of the world" where "men dance and sing" and where "all men were poets," of Shelley's first age of poetry. It is an island of fiery sun, of flame-coloured birds, of rainbow

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[12]Trinity College Archives, Dublin, Dowden MS. O. The letter dated Sept. 22, 1882 also contains the reference to J. B. Yeats' recent comment on the "furtive" characters of Dowden's poetry. This suggests that the extended metaphor of the "pyramid of criticism" may have formed part of a recent discussion at Yeats' studio.

[13]National Library, Dublin, Yeats MS. 3726.

colours, of the imaginative life at its richest. From this state there is a progressive decline, and Oisin dies into life (lured back by memory through a progression of signs which are ironically presented: a wooden spear shaft, a beech bough, and a starling). These are progressively more insistent symbols of Oisin's human life and, conversely, spell the decline of the dream. In Book Two the predominant elements are air and water; the moon replaces the sun; green, silver, and white succeed the reds and saffrons; the lone gull replaces the chorus of birds. In Book Three water and earth are the predominant elements, shadows and grey starlight are the only light, and walking owls the only conscious, active life.

In letters to Katherine Tynan already referred to, Yeats described Book Two as the most "inspired" and symbolic of the books, but not the most artistically controlled. Indeed, the second book has a feverish intensity about it which does suggest that the poet had not full control of its visionary energy. It must be seen as the most troubled and turbulent of the books and probably, as Ellmann suggests, most involved with personal emotions. The journey to the dark towers, the freeing of the chained woman, the battle with the demon are as archetypal as Childe Roland and certainly include passages which are open to Freudian interpretation.[14] Whatever the complexities, which developed as personal repressions rose out of those "churning" waters of the subconscious to be imaged forth in Mananan's usurped castle, we should keep in mind the hero's role as poet-figure which we have noted in Book One. There would

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[14]A Freudian reading of the poem's symbolism is given by Morton Irving Seiden in his article "A Psychoanalytic Essay on William Butler Yeats," Accent (1946), pp. 178-190.

have been, it seems logical to assume, a plan or program for Oisin in the second book, a plan which is somewhat obscured by the personal emotional involvement of Yeats as the nightmare atmosphere develops its own laws of growth, but which nevertheless should be traceable. Yeats' letter to Tynan on the second book announces a deliberate symbolism within the romance of the story but defies the reader's capability to gain knowledge of its secret:

> In the second part of Oisin under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did it would spoil the act. Yet the poem is full of symbols...[15]

Yeats' symbolism at this early date is not as complex as it becomes later when it has developed layers of allusions. But while less complex it is apt to be more arbitrary and personal, or specifically literary. The letter suggests that Yeats already had formed his theory about the function of symbols which, although deliberately planned and inserted into his poetry, have their effective meaning as an undercurrent of suggestion in the romance. The possibility that they "could be found out" argues their planned insertion, but the statement that such a finding out would "spoil the act" proposes that they have once in the poem, a life independent of and surpassing definable meaning. We can respect the poet's art and the aesthetics of symbolism by not attempting to assign precise significance to details of the second book. It would be injudicious in any case because the emotional temper of the book fuses or transforms significances and an attempt to exact definition at

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[15]Wade, p. 88.

meanings would be frustrated by the protean nature of the symbols. Like the demon with which Oisin battles under a variety of forms (as this shape changer transforms into an eel, a fir tree, a drowned corpse) significances dissolve and re-form mysteriously.

The potential political allegory which Ellmann suggests is not our topic. However, the probability of its intention points to the significance of Oisin as a modern deliverer, and if we recall his role as a poet-figure we may reasonably ask whether his actions of freeing the chained victim and fighting the demon are not more than literature in the service of politics, that is, propaganda. For a more appropriate description of the victim and the oppressor might be made in terms of a literary allegory. The chained body obviously suggests both Ireland and Ireland's Muse. The demon oppressor is a complex of values, some of them "literary," whose tyranny over the imagination has been described by all the romantic poets from Blake to Keats and whose continued oppression was a favourite theme of Yeats.

The protean quality of the images in Book Two might be expected from the poet's emotional involvement with the material of that book. It is, as his letters admit, the most symbolic book and in it he "brays" out his hopes for humanity. Within the allegorical structure there is a logic to the increased use of personal symbolism in the age of heroic romance, and Yeats does develop his poetry in this Book in a manner different from the more closely controlled Books One and Three. The artistic success of the result may be questionable, but the logic of the attempt to write in another character can, I think, be explained.

We have suggested that Yeats' historic consciousness of the meaning of this venture into Irish legend would inevitably include an assessment of the past in order to define values for a hopeful renaissance. Book Three presents the modern, contemporary period and from its slumbering imagination the rebirth must come. Oisin dreams in that book of his Fenian life, that is, the age of Book Two. Book Two is the age of heroic romance and is associated with the Irish heroic period, the period of the Fenian cycle. This age of heroic romance is a phase of aesthetic history but it is also a perennial spirit for a certain kind of imagination. Book Two has a middle position in the three ages, but it also has a central position in the significance of the whole poem. The age presented in Book Two gave rise to the Oisin legend which now has become the subject of Yeats' whole poem. The spirit of Oisin (as a poet-figure for Yeats' values and hopes) presides over the whole poem, but centres itself in Book Two. That Book, it seems, was intended to be the visionary, apocalyptic Book in the cycle. It presents the Ossianic spirit in the present as a symbol of the freedom of imagination, and identifies the present (i.e.: 1887) with the past (the Irish heroic age).

In suggesting a "visionary, apocalyptic" intention, I do not argue for its artistic achievement. For example, freeing the chained lady, whoever or whatever she is, is an allegorical action, perhaps of meanings which are multiple, but which are potentially definable. The symbolic elements of the book are not powerfully organized, and are as apt to puzzle as intrigue or move a reader. By "visionary" is meant the poet's imaginative identification of the story of Book Two with perennial myth.

Oisin's freeing of the lady is an action which sets free the heroic imagination, an action which transcends the legend, the rhetorical confrontation of Patrick and Oisin, and the legendary conclusion of Oisin's defeat. Such, I believe, is the intention of the kind of poetry which Yeats writes in this second book, and such is the logic of its attempt in the poem's organization where a legend is allegorized and then the allegory itself is transcended.

Book Two is controlled not only by the central action of rescue and battle but also by the allegorical use of colour, elements, heavenly bodies, birds, etc. which relate the book in the progression of the poem as a whole. But the book does have a high preponderance of personal symbolism and a structure of development which is either an allegory of the dream vision or an unconscious use of the archetypal form of a romantic's quest for an objective tradition. We have considered Yeats' early obsession with the Alastor theme and have suggested that he was highly critical of this persona wherein the poet-figure begins in lonely uncertainty and ends his brief, self-conscious career in the deadly certainty of solipsism.

Some incidents such as the freeing of the lady and the battle with the demon have the character of allegory. That is they point to precise meanings, probably multiple but nevertheless separable. The central actions of the book are allegorical actions. Surrounding these central actions is an atmosphere of symbolism, not the limited symbolism of the image patterns we have already suggested which define the progressive significance of the books, but rather a symbolism of intuition which is a mode of knowledge, of exploration, and not a mode of expression. Thus,

Yeats, in this book, seems not only to be trying to express the character of a literature of heroic romance, he is also attempting to discover himself in the role of bard. It would be unappreciative of Yeats' problem to assume that with the decision to write on the Irish legend of Oisin he simply adopted the role of bard and sang the story. The "subject" of the poem was, in part, his own poetic self which he was still in the process of discovering. Yeats does not emerge from his romantic inheritance by writing "off" his Alastor "phase" or his Endymion "phase" in poems previous to "Oisin." Oisin is a wanderer not only as the hero of a legend but also as a poet-figure, and it is with the memory of other "seekers," other visitors to other islands, that we should read the significance of the symbolism of the second book.

We have spoken of Yeats' critical awareness of his romantic inheritance in his experimentation with various personae. We must now ask ourselves how Yeats would have viewed and planned a work of the magnitude of "Oisin." How would he have interpreted his stage of evolution as a poet in attempting such a poem? It would be naive to assume that the supposed subject, an Irish legend, offered a complete break from his past preoccupation with problems of persona, and romantic themes of self-expression. Under O'Leary's promptings he had a "cause," and in Irish legend he had a "tradition," but he could not simply invent a fictive self to be bard to that tradition. Rather, he would have understood the challenge of the enterprise in terms of his own poetic development and quite consciously, probably, wrote into the poem (and probably in Book Two) his evolution into a new responsible role as a national poet. It is usual with critics to assume that he attempted a

bardic role and was betrayed miserably by a style too obviously at odds with the intended Celtic character of the poem. It was inevitable that he could not change his style overnight, as it were, and the style he used must seem inadequate if we assume that the achievement of a noble simplicity in the old Celtic manner was his sole intent. But the poem, understood allegorically, was intended as a contemporary poem on the relevance of the values of an heroic tradition. The poem's style was necessarily contemporary, but so, we argue, was the significance of its theme.

What prompts such reasonable speculation is the striking similarity of the action and imagery of Book Two to Keats "Hyperion" fragments, especially "The Fall of Hyperion." These fragments were Keats' attempts to write an epic, and "The Fall," especially, is concerned with Keats' self-assessment of his art and his questioning upon the nature of poetry. "The Fall" is introduced by a dream vision, like the Wordsworth passage considered, and this in itself would hold it in Yeats' memory. Yeats, entering upon his epic attempt to write "Oisin" and leaving behind his pastoral exercises "in the Spenserian manner" and the romantic personae of Alastor or Endymion, would have recognized in Keats' "Hyperion" poems a preoccupation similar to his.

Keats in "The Fall of Hyperion" surveys an exhausted poetic tradition, presented by the naturalism of the garden where he comes upon the remnants of a feast (one is reminded of Yeats' comment upon the "crumbs" on the table which is all that English poetry has left, in contrast to the full banquet available in Irish legend). The garden is deserted, the gods have fled, but there remains in a cup a divine

draught which he drinks. He falls into a sleep, the garden dies, the vision begins. The theme of the vision, like Wordsworth's discussed previously, is the true nature of poetry and its relation to the life of man. Oisin too has left the paradise of the first island, summoned by memories of his responsibilities to the world of men.

In brief summary we can review the similarities of Book Two and "The Fall of Hyperion." In both, stairs are climbed to reach the presence of the chained lady or the throne of Moneta, mother of the muses. Oisin is described by a mysterious voice as the saddest of men just as Keats' persona is described as "Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve" (I, 176). The vast halls entered, which are now vacant, belonged to a fallen race of gods: Mananan the Irish sea god and magician, and Saturn, the fallen king of the Titans. The height of the halls is emphasized in a similar way: a seagull flies, out of earshot, yet under the roof of Mananan's hall; Saturn's emptied temple is

> ...with roof august
> Builded so high, it seemed the filmed clouds
> Might spread beneath. (I, 63)

The eagle guardians of the chained lady, who dream on the dim past (and are related to the sleeping eagle men of island three) have their correlative in "the eagle brood," the fallen Titans. The similarity of the grieving muses, Moneta and the lady, is extended to their description. From "Oisin":

> A lady with soft eyes like funeral tapers
> And face that seemed wrought out of moonlit vapours
> And a sad mouth... (I, 69-71)

The passage in "The Fall of Hyperion":

> ...Then saw I a wan face
> Not pined by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd

By an immortal sickness which kills not
. . . . . .
But for her eyes I should have fled away
They held me back with a benignant light
. . . . . .
...in blank splendour, beam'd like the milk moon,
(I, 256-269)

The thundering god of Patrick is paralleled to the usurping Jupiter. Moneta has no visible demon which keeps her prisoner but as the mother of poetic inspiration she has been a prisoner

Of all mock lyrists, large self-worshippers
And careless Hectorers in proud bad verse
(I, 207-208)

as Keats, in a brief diatribe, describes false poets and invokes their destruction. The demon which Oisin battles has been variously and wildly "interpreted," and there is no reason why, as a shape-changer whom Oisin fights in many forms, it should not be a composite creation of <u>everything</u> hateful at that time to the young poet. However, its description certainly favours its deliberate participation in the allegory of poet heroes and chained muses. Combining a repugnant sentimentality with splenetic pride it is pictured as a doleful mourner of a tradition run dry, the general desiccation associated with the character of its singing:

...beyond on a dim plain
A little runnel made a bubbling strain,
And on the runnel's stony and bare edge
A dusky demon dry as a withered sedge
Swayed, crooning to himself an unknown tongue:
In a sad revelry he sang and swung
Bacchant and mournful, passing to and fro
His hand along the runnel's side, as though
The flowers still grew there...
...He slowly turned:
A demon's leisure:... (II, 155-168)

The impression of a puling lyric poetry palely loitering and crooning to itself, roused to rhetorical "proud bad verse" in its "barking" when Oisin approaches, is inescapable. All of Yeats' critical detestation of sentimental lyric poetry and rhetorical Hectorers is summed up in this demon.[16] The "wizard" sword of Mananan "whose shine/No centuries could dim" executes a poetic justice upon the creature. The continued potency of the sword points to its present power, in Yeats' hands, to battle a contemporary enemy. The battle which Oisin renews every fourth day is never finally ended.

The poet-figure in Keats' poem passes through an ordeal of spirit, and rises courageously to the possibility of a deeper poetic vision in the dialogue with Moneta. He is then led to a "shrouded vale" where the fallen Titans, the "eagle brood," lie and dream

> As when upon a tranced summer night
> Forests, branch-charmed by the earnest stars
> Dream, and so dream all night, without a noise,
> (I, 372-374)

So too, does Oisin leave Mananan's hall to visit the third island where eagle men, the Formian giants, like the Titans, sleep under the planets of a usurping Olympian hierarchy. The Hyperion sun of the first island has been replaced by the moon of time in the second which "goads the waters night and day,/That all be overthrown." Both "Hyperion" and "The Fall of Hyperion" were evidently in Yeats' mind during the composition of Book Two. The theme of the fall of a Titan race, and

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[16]The parallel to Keats' "Sleep and Poetry" seems to have been deliberate. Yeats, in 1887 or 1888, quoted Keats' diatribe to Herbert Horne, "accusing him of leaning towards that eighteenth century 'That taught a school/Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit.'" Auto., p. 169.

their slumbering defeat under the tyrannous rule of Jupiter, presents a classical parallel to the Irish myth of a supplanted race, held now in subjection by Patrick's thundering god, but who will rise again. More important, Keats' use of the Titan myth to explore his own growth as a poet has special affinities with Yeats' concern in this most personal and symbolic of the three books. Keats, however, in his poems, is no partisan for the Titan's cause. He accepts the fated necessity of the fall and looks forward to the nascent Apollo, the Olympian counterpart of Hyperion, whose growing awareness of his role as patron of true poetry is associated in the poem with Keats' own development. Yeats and Oisin, in the heroic manner, are quite simply partisan and tend to view the Titan theme in a Shelleyan way, through its Promethean suggestiveness. It does seem likely that the fragments were remembered by Yeats for their memorable images, and their Promethean associations. "Hyperion" in fact presents a very Miltonic scene where Saturn addresses his fallen "angels." This scene, read by Yeats probably in the light of Shelley's interpretation of Satan's heroism in Paradise Lost, would remain in his memory in a form readily adaptable for the allegory of "Oisin."

We can view Book Two, then, as unique among the three books. Although it is the middle book of an "historical" sequence, it suggests by the central action of the poet-figure freeing the muse that the heroic age of poetry can be renewed, and that the twilight of the sleepers in Book Three can emerge from the "dusk" of the demon's rule into the dawn of a renaissance.

Yeats' occult studies may have provided symbols or ritual sequences for the "incidents" of this second book. His reference to Johann Valentin Andreas, in his letter to Boyd, suggests, as Wade has said,[17] a familiarity with A. E. Waite's The Real History of the Rosicrucians.[18] If we read the sequence of events in Book Two as Bloom argues the whole of the poem should be read, that is as a dramatization of an "internal quest," there are some affinities with the dream allegory "The Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz" which Waite reprinted in his book. While we have been emphasizing the objective allegory of the poem we can appreciate the fact that Book Two, composed in a "feverish" vision, contains a high proportion of symbolism of a very personal nature, and that figures such as the chained maiden and the demon had both a public, objective significance and a personal obsessive meaning. The similarities between the sequence of incidents and the dream allegory can be summarized. We may note, however, that Waite emphasizes the satiric character of the dream, and it is most unlikely that Yeats would have accepted it as a serious explication of occult experience.

The dream is preceded by the sudden appearance of a lady, trumpet in one hand and documents in the other. She announces the new dispensation of knowledge, a "Royal Wedding" with truth. In the dream which follows, chained creatures seek ascent from their dungeon of ignorance. One seeker ascends to a higher plane of understanding and advances towards a room whose doorway is flanked by two columns whose significance

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[17]Wade, p. 592.

[18]A. E. Waite, The Real History of the Rosicrucians (London: George Redway, York Street, Covent Garden, 1887).

was "dark and mysterious." There follows within the room a satirical weighing-in ceremony designed to separate good and bad artists, those who serve truth and those who write "false, fictitious books." The parallel to Keats' poet-figure's confrontation with Moneta's challenge is marked. There follows the ascent of 365 stairs to a large hall where further tests of worthiness are enacted. Elaborate allegories are developed in an extravagant baroque manner, including several processions or masques similar to the Masque of Cupid episode in The Faerie Queene (which Yeats had found to remain most persistently in his memory). In assessing this dream allegory, Waite points out the general tradition of serious esoteric thought which lies behind its satiric character. The tradition of a mysticism "in an age of scientific and religious materialism" kept alive the essential doctrines of hermetic correspondences, of magic (Paracelsus is quoted) and of a spiritual alchemy, all of which doctrines were debased by their profane propagation among the credulous and uninitiated. Several Rosicrucian apologists are referred, among them Robert Fludd, whose "De Macrocosmi Fabrica" presented a pattern which Yeats might well have found corroborative for his own themes; the macrocosm is described by Fludd as having three regions, experienced in history as three stages in a descending hierarchy.

Oisin's ascent up the many stairs to Mananan's great hall could be interpreted as a process of initiation but the idea of an "internalized quest" is most profitably interpreted if we remember that Yeats' theme is literary, and that the shackles which bind the Muse figure are the confining tyranny of alien literary ideals. The Muse released, then, is

not only the Irish Muse who is to inspire the "neo-romantic" movement, but also Yeats' own hitherto shackled allegiance to an alien culture, and in this sense he resolves by action (by "incident" as he would say) the dilemma of romantic subjectivism.

We can recall Yeats' imaginative association of Ferguson with Manannan, and understand that the demon who has usurped his castle would be the same literary enemies whom Yeats attacked in his article on Ferguson. In his introduction to Book Three of his poem "Congal," Ferguson defined Manannan's office: "it was in Pagan days to protect from invasion the Coast of Ireland," an association also defined by O'Grady: "Manannan was the god of the sea, of winds and storm...He was called the Far Shee of the promontories."[19] Yeats in November, 1889, in an article in The Leisure Hour, calls "Congal" "the most perfect equivalent for the manner of the ancient Celtic bards in modern literature,"[20] effectively identifying that spirit which had been suppressed by an alien culture.

In ascending those stairs, the poet-figure Oisin ascends towards a new responsibility and discovers a Muse in chains who is both national and highly personal. She is the embodiment of the cause of Yeats' neo-romantic movement and is also the Anima figure of a personal confrontation. Like Moneta she is the image of primitive imaginative power, mythologically a captive Titaness, psychologically the dark self with which the conscious seeks union. Niamh, the muse of imaginative

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[19]O'Grady, History of Ireland, II, 73.

[20]"Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland," The Leisure Hour (Nov. 1889), p. 34.

freedom, who would have kept Oisin forever in the Land of Youth (the Land of Innocence) has reluctantly accepted the necessity of leading him to a muse of human responsibility. Oisin, following the necessary cycle of life, must leave this muse, but the chains have been severed and others will serve a liberated imaginative power. In the severing of those chains which bind the racial life, the individual life has its significance.

The maiden in the second book symbolizes the union between personal and racial muse. The "incident" of severing chains is the action which illogically but successfully severs the Gordian knot of the romantic dilemma. Just as she has a double aspect so does the demon with which Oisin battles. In the allegory of the emancipation of the race's imaginative powers, the demon is the usurping tyrant of foreign literary dominance. But he must also be, if we have read the Muse figure rightly, Yeats' shadowed literary self, inheritor and practitioner of foreign themes and styles which now must be repeatedly subdued. It is in the demon that the recurring malignancy (and fatal attraction) of the Alastor spirit is expressed.

The demon of the "exterior quest" is quite probably Dowden, crooning over the dried up rivulet of a tradition (while all around the waters of Manannan seethe and churn with a "gusty" energy). This is the Dowden whom Yeats later described in the Autobiographies as "withering in that barren soil"[21] of Trinity College West Britonism, mourning the "brief blossom"[22] of a dead Wordsworthianism. He is an antagonist both

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[21] Auto., p. 235.

[22] Auto., p. 235.

political and literary, and Yeats' comparison between Dublin Castle and Trinity, made in 1892, encourages this identification: "As Dublin Castle with the help of the police keeps Ireland for England, so Trinity College with the help of the schoolmasters keeps the mind of Ireland for scholasticism with its accompanying weight of mediocrity."[23] The extent of the caricature goes as far as associating Dowden's "dark romantic face" with the duskiness of the demon,[24] the muted "crooning of his song with his poems, the enraged "barking" with his known attacks on Irish literary ambitions. Yeats, in 1886, had begun "to say violent and paradoxical things to shock provincial sobriety, and Dowden's ironical calm had come to seem but a professional pose."[25]

It is necessary at this point to consider again Yeats' relation to Dowden, and to point out further details which suggest a satiric portrait. It is probable that Dowden's ironical calm and self-control on some occasion have been broken in exasperated anger at the young poet even before the publication of Yeats' essay on Ferguson. In a letter to Todhunter in August 1886, Dowden wrote of Yeats "...he hangs in the balance between genius (and to speak rudely) fool."[26] The relations between the established critic and the young poet had been strained ever since the episodes which Yeats has recounted in the Autobiographies when he was chilled by the recognition of the critic's real assessment of

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[23]"Dublin Scholasticism and Trinity College," United Ireland (July 30, 1892), p. 1.

[24]In keeping with the spirit of other revisions in the 1895 version, "dusky" is replaced by "husky".

[25]Auto., p. 95.

[26]Trinity College Archives, Dublin, Dowden MS. O.

Shelley and angered by Dowden's suggestion that he temper his romantic wilfullness by reading George Eliot. Family connections complicated what could readily have become an open antagonism (the family relationship probably helps explain the composite character of the demon in "Oisin" for the allegorical figure has a repulsive intimacy which we will later discuss). Another letter of Dowden's written a full year before that referred to above evidences coolness towards Yeats, expressed in the withholding of judgement about his "fibre" as a poet: "The sap in him is so green and young that I cannot guess what his fibre may afterwards be. So I shall only prophesy that he is to be a poet after the event."[27]

As early as 1883 Yeats was planning a satire directed, in part, against an academic figure. In a letter addressed to O'Grady and published as a preface to O'Grady's republication of a Yeats' story "Michael Clancy, the Great Dhoul, and Death" the poet recalls that at the age of eighteen he had planned a satiric "epic."

> Dear Mr. O'Grady. You asked me to explain how I came to write anything so unlike the rest of my writings as this little bit of fooling...When I was about eighteen I came upon a Connaught folk tale of a tinker and Death and the Devil...I began what was to be a long poem in octosyllabic verse, the verse of the Reynard poems, meaning to make the tinker a type of that jeering cheating Irishman...and to bring him through many typical places and adventures I remember planning out a long conversation between him and a certain portentous professor of Trinity whom I changed into a lap dog, and set to guard the gate of Hell...[28]

This "lap dog" may have been the ancestor of the crooning sycophant of

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Wade, p. 307.

the demon in "Oisin," who, when aroused, turns "barking" upon the poet-figure. Research into the manuscripts in the National Library in Dublin has not uncovered this projected poem, but other verse suggests that the young poet envisaged himself in a role of dragon-slaying. One notebook[29] contains an early undated poem, revised five times, which begins with a Keatsian "I sing of pan" (sic) and "solitude," but which progresses towards a challenge directed towards "the new god who oppressed man." From the sylvan retreat where Pan's followers have fled there will come a prophecy. In the same notebook there is a fragment presenting a "white-haired King" who is "the long expected mighty one" of apocalyptic destruction. A water colour in black pictures a horseman skewering a dragon with a spear. Both verse and picture present themes quite traditional for a follower of Shelley, and the god or dragon under attack are not particularized. There is, however, one untitled allegorical poem in the same notebook whose satiric intention is clear. Its five quatrains present a familiar theme in familiar imagery (later to be employed in Book Three of "Oisin"). In an ivy-covered tower nests a "scholarly owl" which suffers a "midnight" fright from "the ghosts of a thousand years." The "learned bird" flies "scatter brained" in terror and dies of fright, "Because he simply heard/An anti-philosophic howl."[30]

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[29]National Library, Dublin, Yeats MS. 12161.

[30]The owl seems to have been an insistent image of the despised modern calculating intellect for Yeats. Professor Sidnell's description of an 1884 manuscript of what was to become The Shadowy Waters refers to the printed symbol on the exercise book: "a spread-winged owl grasping the globe." The nineteen year old symbolist used this exercise book, I suggest, with perhaps symbolic defiance: he turned it upside down and wrote in it from back to front. M. J. Sidnell, "Manuscript Version of Yeats's The Shadowy Waters: An Abbreviated Description and Chronology of the Papers Relating to the Play in the National Library of Ireland," Bibliographical Society of America (1962), pp. 39-57.

This verse, of uncertain metre, is a variation on the lap-dog satire referred to in the letter to O'Grady. This projected satire which was to bring a poet-figure "through many typical places and adventures" evolved quite probably into the more ambitious "epic" of "Oisin." "Oisin" was planned a poetry of "incident" and it might be expected that its incidents would include satiric episodes. The "typical places" which the satire was to present prompt speculation on the possible presentation of actual places in the satiric section in Book Two of "Oisin." The stairs and the great hall where Oisin encounters the chained Muse reflect numerous literary equivalents,[31] and one of these, the parallel to the series of incidents and to the settings of "The Fall of Hyperion", we consider to be deliberate and instructive for a reading of the poem. Did Yeats intend a presentation of actual places? We know that Book Two was largely written in London in the summer of 1887 and that the research (and probably much of the writing) was carried out in the reading room of the British Museum.

Before reaching the foot of those stairs at the second island, Oisin passes between two statues. These figures are mysterious symbols and their significance is emphasized by their positioning. They are placed at the very portals, as it were, of the meaning of the second book. The original version reads;

> Nearer the castle came we. A vast tide
> Whitening the surge afar, fan-formed and wide,
> Sprang from a gateway walled around with black
> Basaltic pillars marred with hew and hack

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[31] Jeffare's A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (Toronto: MacMillan, 1968) conveniently lists critical speculation on the influence of "Endymion," "Hyperion" and "The Revolt of Islam."

> By mace and spear and sword of sea-gods, nails
> Of some forgotten fiend.
> . . . . . .
> At last the moon and stars shone, and a flight
> Of many thousand steps. Sat either side,
> Fog dripping, pedastalled above the tide,
> Huge forms of stone; between the lids of one
> The imaged meteors had shone and run
> And had disported in the eyes still jet
> For centuries, and stars had dawned and set.
> He seemed a watcher for a sign. The other
> Stretched his long arm to where a misty smother
> The stream churned, and churned. His lips were rolled apart
> As though he told his never slumbering heart.
> He told of every froth-drop hissing, flying.
> We mounted on the stair, the white steed tying
> To one vast foot, froth splashed... (1889 text,
> II, 27-46)

The revised version specifically designates what is implied in the first version: that it is to the foot of the latter statue that Oisin tethers his horse. This may suggest the poet's commitment to the world of history and time as distinct from the poetic world of that sky-gazing "watcher for a sign," but what should be recognized is that whatever the significance of these figures, Oisin, and Yeats, moves between them. Whatever their meaning, we have in this action a hint of the dual significance of the incidents which follow. The ascent of the stairs, in other words, is both an exterior and interior quest.

The tying of the horse to the foot of the statue which points to the churning waters of time may also indicate the turbulence of the moon-dominated drama of this book. The other figure may be a dim memorial to a previous state, before time and decay began, suggestive of Book One's Hyperion period. There appears to be a memory of Keats' "Hyperion" where the poet views Thea weeping at Saturn's feet, sorrowing over their bondage in "aching time." The lids of Saturn which once contained the heavens in view are now closed.

> And still these two were postured motionless,
> Like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern,
> The frozen God still covenant on the earth
> And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet:
> (I, 85-88)

The scene's weighted immobility is repeated in "The Fall of Hyperion";

> Long, long these two were postured motionless,
> Like sculpture builded up upon the grave
> Of their own power... (I, 382-384)

There may be also, in Yeats' mind, a vestigial memory of Wordsworth's dream vision of the Bedouin, which he had employed before as an image of poetic decline. The Saturn interpretation does not accord readily with the "stone" of Euclidean knowledge, but the shell of poetic power which prophesied destruction by a flood of waters may be mutely presented by the pointed hand of the other statue to the churning waters.

If we view these dark symbols with Keats' poems in mind and remember the general progression of the poem "Oisin" within the myth of a Fall, some light is cast on their brooding intensity. However, it seems likely that the poet himself may not have fully understood their full significance despite the fact that he placed them at the foot of the stairs which leads to the action of the book. Yeats may have been obsessively involved with their meaning, so much so that they are not objectively realized in the poem. A passage from the Autobiographies is perhaps as close as we can come to their complex of meaning. Yeats is writing of the years when "Oisin" was being written, although he does not relate the passage to its composition.

> The statues of Mausolus and Artemisia at the British Museum, private, half animal, half divine figure,...became to me, now or later, images of an unpremeditated joyous energy, that neither I nor any other man, racked by doubt and inquiry, can achieve; and that yet, if once achieved, might seem

> to men and women of Connemara or of Galway their very soul...and I wanted to create once more an art where the artist's handiwork would hide as under those half-anonymous chisels, or as we find it in some old Scots ballads, or in some twelfth or thirteenth century Arthurian romance...and what ballad singer was it who claimed to have fought by day in the very battle he sang at night...I was to write many poems where an always personal emotion was woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol...[32]

The association of these figures with an ideal style of "half-anonymous" art related in turn to the heroic freedom of an Arthurian romance or of a ballad singer (who celebrated a unity of being both personal and social in his authorship and with his audience)--all this reads like a summary of the spirit and action of Oisin's battles and celebrations in Book Two. The best commentary on the elusive meanings of these symbols, as is so often the case with Yeats, may be found in his own allusive prose.[33]

While it is probably wise to allow these two symbols their full weight of a finally unanalyzable emotional significance, more precise occult "explanations" are, of course, possible. Any pairs of antinomies could be entertained under their mysterious suggestiveness. Without reducing their mystery one can see their appropriate participation in specific Kabbalistic symbolism which, in turn, may have been employed as part of the pattern of images which define the progression of the poem. Ellmann, although he makes no connection with the symbols under

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[32] Auto., p. 150.

[33] The statues were also associated in Yeats' mind with the epic art attempted in "Oisin": "...I thought constantly of Homer and Dante, and the tombs of Mausolus and Artemesia...I thought that all art should be a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs." Auto., p. 191.

discussion here, refers to unpublished diaries of Yeats which describe "...a Kabbalistic ceremony in which he participated as a young man, where there were 'two pillars, one symbolic of water and one of fire... The water is sensation, peace, night, silence, indolence; the fire is passion, tension, day, music, energy."[34] We may note that these statues at the portals of Book Two could well designate the mixed character of the experience on this island: its strife and celebration are between the island of dancing and the island of repose, between the fire of Book One and the dew drenched landscape of Book Three. We may further observe that the centrality of this middle book is emphasized by Oisin's striding between the two statues, and moreover, that the recurrent cycle of activity on the second island, of one day of battle followed by three days of feasting, mirrors the pattern of the whole poem. Three islands of imaginative life are followed by the confrontation with Patrick, against whose principles the old Oisin rhetorically battles. In the recurring cycles of history there is always the fourth day of battle which urges on the renewal of the pattern. The second book is a microcosm of the whole poem and one can identify the battle with the demon with the battle against Patrick, recognize both as particulars in Yeats' experience and as emblematic of universal struggles. When the confrontation coincides with the larger rhythms of historical necessity, the battle is seen, as we argue it was by Yeats, as apocalyptic.

Oisin does move through a "landscape of art" whose details are very similar to Keats' "The Fall of Hyperion." The appropriateness of the parallel we have previously discussed and it would seem that it was

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[34]Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 27.

deliberately developed and was not the inadvertent imitation of a poet who made pictures "one cannot forget." In Keats' poem the poet-figure moves towards a greater awareness of his responsibility as a poet, first experiencing the shock of recognition before the shadowy figure of Moneta, and then attempting to relate in epic manner the myth of the primordial fall of the Titans and the birth of the new god of the arts, Apollo. For Yeats, the incidents of Book Two of "Oisin" had a planned allegorical function which emphasized objective action, and the poet-figure Oisin finds his identity in the clear role of advancing the cause of a literary movement.

Recalling the satiric intention of much of Book Two, we may speculate on the probability that the landscape of art has also a specific, actual geography. The island of battles would seem to be Dublin (not London as Ellmann has suggested). Mananan's usurped castle, the chained maiden, the alien and tyrannous demon, all point towards Dublin Castle or its literary equivalent (as Yeats has pointed out), Trinity College. After passing between the statues of Masolaus and Artemesia on his daily visits to the reading room at the British Museum where much of the second book of the poem was written, Yeats consciously enacted through his research and writing the deliverance of a Celtic muse. Gazing up at the high blue dome of the reading room he would remember the literary battles with Dowden over the past years, battles which climaxed in the open attack of the essay on Ferguson. That high dome doubtless reminded him of the vaulted ceiling of Trinity College library, the very citadel of the entrenched literary values against which the poet had repeatedly struggled. That famous ceiling may have

appropriately been in mind:

> ...Above, in endless carven jags,
> Lifted the dome, where face in carven face
> Melted and flowed; and in the self-same place
> Hour after hour I waited, and the dome
> Windowless, pillarless, multitudinous home
> Of faces, watched me, and the leisured gaze
> Was loaded with the memory of days
> Buried and mighty. (1889 text, II, 144-151)

The great library has along its walls the pedestalled busts of famous figures; the "memory of days/Buried and mighty" present the occupant with a "leisured gaze." In the light of early dawn, Oisin

> ...found a door deep sunken in the wall,
> The least of doors; beyond the door a plain
> Dusky and herbless, where a bubbling strain
> Rose from a little runnel on whose edge
> A dusk demon, dry as a withered sedge
> Swayed, crooning to himself an unknown tongue:
> (1889 text, II, 154-159)

That the demon is a literary person is without question. The little runnel may be simply a metaphor for a literary tradition run dry (and in deliberate opposition to the swirling ocean waters of Manannan whose turbulence and vigour were an image for the "tumultuous" energy of Irish myth). Or, it may have its source in the fountain placed in the quad adjacent to the library; or again, in the waters of Saint Patrick's well which is situated by the boundary wall of the college on the opposite side of the library and separated from it by a lawn. In either place a Trinity don would find pause in his academic labours, water for his "Wordsworthian" reflections, and sometimes, an encounter with a challenging young man. "The least of doors" which leads to the plain outside may be metaphorical also, but it is a detail which, in the midst of imagery of Titanic immensities, seems peculiarly definite. An inspection of the old library reading room revealed two doors at the far

end of the room (opposite the large entry doors) which are recessed, "deep sunken in the wall," and hidden from ready view because they are cornered by the panels of the library stacks. They are about four and one-half feet high and though they lead to small storage areas, the size of the door and the length and breadth of the room within suggest that they were in earlier times doors which closed staircases leading down to the ground floor and to the "plain" beyond.

Oisin is a protagonist for a national literary cause but he is also a protagonist who attempts to come to grips with certain tendencies of personal temperament and literary influences which were a persistent threat to the epic spirit he deliberately sought to practice and to promote. Oisin in Book One renounced the "Asian" literary manner of Yeats' earlier poetry and announced a dedication to a new muse. In Book Two he advanced between the two mysterious figures, ascended the stairs of self understanding and public responsibility, severed the chains of a public cause and at the same time liberated his own poetic muse from the shackles of subjective brooding. Just as Oisin is a double protagonist, so is the demon a double adversary, and we must now consider the figure as a dramatization of Yeats' own character.

The reader might expect that the special character of Book Two, written in a feverish vision, could raise the old spectre of Alastor, for despite the racial or public emphasis which we argue is the planned allegorical intention of the poem there is an appropriateness, indeed a compelling necessity, in Oisin's battle with his alter ego. The necessity of that confrontation and struggle may not have been realized by the young poet at the outset; it seems probable that this adversary

developed in significance only in the act of writing Book Two. What seems likely is that the complexity of Yeats' relations with Dowden, who was an early patron and remained an official family friend, made a simple satirical presentation impossible. Yeats was personally involved, even implicated, in his relationship with Dowden, for there was an early intimacy and admiration, a sense of gratitude, and a recognition of family associations which would understandably complicate a simple satirical portrayal. The complexities of emotional involvement most probably led to the recognition of the deeper nature of the antagonism, and by including himself in the figure of the demon, Yeats not only made the episode more responsible but moreover justified the liberties he was taking with the caricature of Dowden.

Bloom's reading of the demon's significance as a personal antagonist is related to his interpretation of the poem as a development of the theme of a man "divided against himself" in a world where the "natural" wars continually with the "imaginative."[35] Thus the demon is "his own double, the natural man or soul in him that will not finally die, but that also cannot finally overcome him."[36] Bloom mistakenly identifies the demon with Mananan, the principle of natural change and decay, and by extension, Yeats' own natural self. This is quite simply erroneous. Mananan is symbolic of Ireland's essential imaginative life, and his rule has been usurped by a demon of tyrannous, unimaginative rule. He is also the principle of natural necessity (the grand rhythms of growth, decline and decay) but such "necessity" is liberating in the

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[35]Bloom, p. 103.

[36]Bloom, p. 98.

context of Book Two where tyranny is nominated as the mind-forged manacles of science and its single vision of "progress." By identifying Ireland's imaginative life as youthful and energetic, the rhythms of necessity are allies for Yeats' argument.

What is personal in the figure of the demon is more specifically the character of Yeats' immediate English literary inheritance and the character of his own temperament. There is a decided sense of repugnance in the intimate contact with the shape changing demon, an intimacy and revulsion evident also in the earlier poem "The Two Titans" (where the tyrant figure places a kiss of defeat upon the brow of the struggling poet-figure) and in the drama "The Seeker" where the dominating figure who lures the poet-figure is a bearded witch of similar intimacy. The combat with the demon is repeatedly successful only because Oisin employs the sword of Mananan; that is, because the poet does identify his character in terms of his deliberately adopted role as a protagonist for a literary emancipation. The shape-changing character of the demon presents once again the condition of revolting intimacy.

> ...to many forms he grew,
> Evading, turning; once did I hew and hew
> A fir tree roaring in its leafless top,
> Once held between my arms, with livid chop
> And sunken shape, a nine-day's corpse sea-dashed,
> Forms without numbers. (1889 text, II, 175-180)

The shape-changing character suggests not only the tactics of evasive yet angered combat associated with Dowden (who fought Yeats' "movement" in ways which seemed to the poet "unfair") but also suggests Yeats' dislike for his own indeterminate character, his inconstancy, all that might later be more consciously and formally defined as "vacillation."

The "dusky" demon, we recall, was first heard "crooning" by a little runnel, and we may have revealed in these details Yeats' complicity with literary values and inspiration which Dowden personified. Yeats had a dark complexion, and he chanted and crooned while composing. This last detail may be an ironic condemnation of a mannerism so at odds with the new conviction that one should write with a "gusty energy." The shape-changing antagonist (whom Oisin cannot finally subdue) has its reappearance in Dhoya written several years after "Oisin." In that very personal myth, Dhoya battles a shape-changer who is a rival for a muse figure, and the antagonist becomes a bundle of reeds, an image of ironic literary associations. In "Oisin" the demon may also have significance as the threatening chaos of Hodos Chameliontis, an appropriate concern for the quester into the occult who had advanced between figures whose occult significance we have already suggested. The allies for Yeats' "secret thought" were sometimes of unsettling ambiguity for a poet whose public mission was clear, and the composite demon may well have included, in its multiplicity of significance, allusions to the dangers of occult explorations (which could be as bewildering as a descent into a Shelleyan vortex). The somewhat deliberate drama of Yeats' opening address to a meeting of the Hermetic Society in June of 1885 should not mislead one into discounting the reality of the experiences of subsequent investigation into the occult. Warning the uninitiated that the "maze of eastern thought" must be explored with care, Yeats observed that, "...on the road to truth lurks many a dragon and goblin of mischief in wait for the soul. Miracle hunger is one of them. The dragon of the abstract is another, devouring forever the freedom and the pride of

life."[37] Since freedom and pride of life are the values which a book of "gusty energy" espoused, the demon figure may well have significance also as an image of philosophical abstractions. In a poem where the poet-figure is committed to a public role the private maze of speculation must be seen as threatening to the simple zeal of Oisin's mission. The struggle is recurring in Book Two, and it is certainly repeated with many variations in later poetry. For example, "Fergus and the Druid" employs a legend to dramatize the division in Yeats' mind between his sense of public duty for a national literary cause and his desire to leave the world of young Ireland organizations for a life of subjective exploration. Fergus meets a Druid of esoteric, occult knowledge, who is, naturally, another shape-changer, and his attraction to him is as understandable as Oisin's combat with the "demon" shape-changer of the earlier poem.

The beech bough[38] in the flood, bringing back memories of Finn, breaks the spell of this island's imaginative power. Niamh and Oisin ride to the beach of the third island:

> And we rode on the plains of the sea's edge;
> the sea's edge barren and grey,
> Grey sand on the green of the grasses and over
> the dripping trees,
> Dripping and doubling landward, as though they
> would hasten away,
> Like an army of old men longing for rest from
> the moan of the seas. (1889 text, III, 13-16)

The grey sands of time cover the green, and the "murmurous dropping, old

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[37]Quoted by Ellmann in Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 42.

[38]The beech was associated in Celtic legend with written poetry. A beech bough may be a symbol of the severed branch of a once-flourishing tradition. The mood of reverie in Book Three would seem to be aptly introduced by such symbolism.

silence and that one sound" image time dropping in decay on a slumbering earth. The descent from "drops of flame" in Book One, to the airy towers built upon the foam of the churning sea in Book Two, to the dew drops falling to earth follows the pattern of elemental decline moving from imaginative life to terrestial necessity. On this island the poet-figure dreams in the company of the sleepers on the island. The sleepers, giants beautiful of form, with feathered ears and gold claws, belong to Irish Titan mythology. Their weapons and art belong to a time before the bronze and iron age, before Vulcan's smithy brought forth "savour of poisonous brass and metal sick" as Keats,says viewing his valley of Titans. Moneta who has led Keats' poet-figure to the valley in "The Fall of Hyperion," much as Oisin has been led, explains the scene:

> I humanize my sayings to thine ear,
> Making comparisons of earthly things;
> Or thou might'st better listen to the wind,
> Whose language is to thee a barren noise,
> Though it blows legend-laden through the trees--
> In melancholy realms big tears are shed.
> More sorrow like to this, and such like woe,
> Too huge for mortal tongue... (II, 2-9)

Yeats' island is legend-laden with several traditions, but the "Hyperion" fragments continue as an important source. The melancholy realms of the third island belong to the mood of a Titanic fall from glory, but also reflect the morbid elegaic note of modern poetry. The mood of the opening lines of Tithonus,

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall
> The vapours weep their burden to the ground,

is logically present in the world of island three. It is an island of statues with affinities to the earlier verse play. But the weight of history lies over these slumbering forms. Their revival cannot be

accomplished by a Naschina with lucky eyes.

The eagle brood on this island are related to the Fomors "with eagle faces" in the manuscript of the early version of The Shadowy Waters. In that work, Forgael, a poet wanderer, came to recognize them as images of his mind; and Yeats discovered that Forgael was sailing the seas not of Irish legend but of romantic self-discovery. Oisin, however, is much more limited as a poet-figure; he is not a discoverer of the allegorical scheme of his poem but only its agent. The sleeping eagle race are thus objectively if mysteriously realized. However privately symbolic for Yeats, they are allegorical of a "state of mind" within the general allegory of the poem and we will consider them as a mode of expression of a general idea.

The sleepers are stirred into momentary consciousness and open their eyes "dull with the smoke of their dreams" when

> ...the sun was
> On silver or gold
> When brushed with the wings of the owls, in the dimness
> They love going by;
> When a glow-worm was green on a grass-leaf... (III, 97-99)[39]

The colours refer to higher states of imaginative consciousness, the gold of island one, the silver moon and green of island two which temporarily rouse the sleepers from their grey dreams. The brushing wings of the owls would then seem to have significance beyond the natural explanation that their movements disturb the otherwise still atmosphere. The owls walk amid the sleepers as natural inhabitants of a world of shadows and starlight. Their great eyes indeed depend upon darkness for their sight. Their nests are built in the locks of the

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[39]These lines remained unchanged through various revisions of the poem.

sleepers. Why does the brushing of a wing produce the effect of glinting gold or silver or the glow of green?

The answer is that these birds, as distinct from the flame-coloured birds of Book One or the lone wandering gull of Book Two, are images of the intellect, specifically the analytic reason. Their activity is imagination's sleep. A traditional symbol for intellect, they are employed by Shelley in a memorable passage in his Defense where they are distinguished from the soaring power of the imagination. Poetry ascends "...to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar."[40] The image may have its shade of satire in Yeats' earliest published poem "Song of the Faerie,"

> So let us dance on the fringed wave
> And shout at the wisest owls
> In their downy caps,...

and we have already considered the satire in the manuscript which identified owls with the blindness of academics. Yeats' owls do not even fly. They walk. But their wings are associated, as all wings are, with a potentiality for freedom from the bounds of earth, and brushed by their feathers, the "eagle race" are momentarily aroused to sit up on ground where they sleep. The birds preside over the sleep of the island, their dominance expressing the theme of "Sleep and Poetry" or "Morpheus' "owlet-pinions" of Endymion, or Blake's "single vision and Newton's sleep."

Niamh and Oisin sleep: "Square leaves of the ivy moved over us, binding us down to our rest." Whether the "square" leaves of ivy are Euclidean nature, a comment on the historical influence of Wordsworth's

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[40]Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry" reprinted in Shelley's Literary and Philosophical Criticism, ed. with intro. by John Shawcross (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), p. 153.

starlight, is difficult to say. The association of owls and ivy, however, appear in an article of Yeats written in 1890 where the theme of minor poetry is considered. Reviewing William Watson's "Wordsworth's Grave and Other Poems," Yeats credits the poet with technical proficiency, with "...an exquisite expression of a sensitive nature, a nature that is refined, inquiring, subtle--everything but believing. It is a nature admirable for most things that man has to do--except found religions or write the greatest poetry."[41] But when reading the volume, "One thinks...of a small house full of books somewhere in a pastoral country, with ivy falling over the windows and an owl somewhere in the deep shadow of the eaves."[42] The third island, the contemporary state of imaginative life, is a state of somnolence; its poetic activity is either the poetry of dreams, or the intellectual, academic poetry of the study.[43]

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[41] Letters to the New Island, p. 211.

[42] Ibid., p. 212.

[43] The idea is repeatedly expressed in Yeats' essays and reviews written in the 1890's. The slumbering state of the modern imagination produces only criticism or a poetry of nostalgia. Dowden's pyramid building may be recalled in the first excerpt:

"It seems to me that the imagination...during the last two hundred years...has been laid in a great tomb of criticism." "Irish National Literature," The Bookman (Sept. 1895), p. 167.

"I cannot get it out of my mind that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation, about to come in its place..." "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux," an 1895 essay reprinted in Essays and Introductions, p. 197.

"...for the persons and passions in the poems are mainly reflections our mirror has caught from older poems." Ibid., p. 196.

Whenever fitfully awakened, the Titan-Formians renew their sleep by waving the bell-branch[44] because the world of science is so inimical. Their reaction to owls and starlight is that expressed later by Yeats in a poem "On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac" which has as its theme the disappointment of social and literary hopes for an heroic Ireland and the threat of the world's growing murderousness. He there offers the resolution: "Stretch out your limbs and sleep a long Saturnian sleep." In other later poems the allegorical theme which we have been discussing receives similar abbreviation, sometimes in epigrammatic form as in "The Three Movements" and "The Nineteenth Century and After" which review a literary tradition dwindled to a "gasping" present. Ironic commentary is replaced by heroic defiance in Yeats' last poem "The Black Tower" where the heroic dead buried upright facing seaward await the king's great horn in blind bitter faith of an apocalyptic renewal. These dead have as their poetic ancestors the sleeping giants of Oisin's third island. However, the dark pessimism of "The Black Tower" is evident in the violent assertion of hope, a hope ironically undercut by false rumours of delivery or renewal. The sleepers of Oisin's island present a situation which suggests an awakening if it does not emphasize it. The emphasis is upon imagination's slumbering strength and the dreams of Oisin on that island are dreams of the heroic age. Oisin lives, allegorically, the poetry of

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[44]The bell-branch would seem to be related to the beech bough. In the 1890 poem "The Dedication of a Book of Stories Selected From the Irish Novelists" (Variorum, p. 129) the bell-branch, "torn from the bough" of ancient Irish legend protects the dream wisdom and "the cause which never dies" from the inimical world of getting and spending.

revery and dream, the poetry of Yeats' contemporary age which, like Yeats' description of Rossetti's poetry "follows through deep woods, where the star glimmers among dew-drenched boughs."[45]

A starling, a bundle of feathers, falls from the sky and the imaginative journey falls to earth. Oisin, holding in his fingers the "fluttering sadness of earth," is drawn back to the world of men hopefully only for a short period to glimpse again the life that has haunted the dream, but in fact drawn by the gravity of his earth-bound fate, by the force which has drawn him downwards since the imaginative heights of the first island. Coming to the Irish coast, still believing in his power to return to Niamh, Oisin sees his horse "crushing the sand and the shells" on the beach, still master of time and singer of heroic song and contemptuous of these lyric shells of an enfeebled poetry. Naschina's boat, in The Island of Statues when she had arrived at the island of heroes, crushed the sand and the shells of time and Arcadian poetry of which she was so scornful, but she was entering the state of imagination which Oisin is now leaving.

The fall to earth, pulled by the weight of three centuries suspended in a bag of sand, ends the imaginative journey. Within the tradition of the legend, Oisin's Fenian world is supplanted by Patrick's Christian one and, in the historical context, Oisin's fate is pathetic and his defiance of Patrick impotent. Viewing the poem in its allegorical spirit, however, Oisin's protest is a protest of Yeats against his contemporary age. The dialogue with Patrick, then, is a rhetorical war, as Yeats would define rhetoric, and has behind it the literary tradition

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[45]Essays and Introductions, p. 53.

of Milton's Satan and Shelley's Prometheus. The myth of historic pattern (the decline of imaginative life through the ages traced out by the system of images we have discussed) condemns the present, exalts an heroic past, and suggests the possibility of a renewal. This possibility exists within a cyclic interpretation of the myth of history.

Within history the Fenian Oisin is a victim. Within history, as a poet-figure, he is a contemporary rebel who is within the historical fact of Patrick's modern Ireland, accepting its present, objective reality but morally repudiating its values. This is the protesting voice which recognizes two kinds of truth (as in the Happy Shepherd's poem); the psychological "human truth" wars against the oppressive objective truth of Patrick or of the "cold star-bane." Patrick's and science's truth is a fact of present history. Man lives within history and Yeats certainly remained a conscious participant in its drama, writing much of his poetry in direct response to its brutal moment or in considered response to its "pattern" as he imaginatively conceived it.

Our discussion of "Oisin" has emphasized an allegorical structure, suggesting probable sources for its formulation, and the motivation for its use in a poem which announced a new direction in Yeats' work and, which, he hoped, heralded a new movement in a national literature. We have centered attention upon a myth of three ages of imagination as a summary history of the past, an assessment of the present, and as an implied prophecy for the future (In Oisin's allegorical severing of the chains in Book Two and in the imaginative, symbolic structure of that book which parallels Keats' development in the "Hyperion" fragments).

However, "Oisin" is also a poem about man's perennial condition in time, in the paradox of dreams haunting life and life haunting dreams which the antithetical pattern of symbols presents. The emerging insistence of spear shaft, green bough, and starling patterns the imagination's death into life. This theme, obvious in the poem, is a persistent one in later poetry. No historical theories, no phases, nor cycles release the individual moment's antithetical experience from its stubborn position in the here and now. "Human truth" has its rhetorical struggle against contemporary history and in this struggle the personality of the self's values finds momentary, psychological "unity of being." But "human truth" is itself a mysterious paradox only to be understood, if at all, as a process of interaction between thought and action, knowledge and power, the life and the dream.

In the antithetical world of faery and man, Yeats found expression for this theme. We cannot say it was the source of the theme because the source lies in the complexities of an historical dualism and his resultant divided sensibility. In the two shepherd poems, we witnessed a sense of division which is symptomatic; that is, it potentially extends beyond the formalization which those poems give it. The poet in those poems stands between two views of nature, one dead and mathematical, the other insensible of man. Hazard Adams has suggested that we assess Yeats' problem as a "false dichotomy" between dream and reality, but such a definition supposes that a Blakeian vision is available to another historical period and that Yeats' formalization in these poems is final. Yeats could say with Blake that the mind of man is the author of the two views of nature presented in these poems, but

the point is that their invention is not easily dismissed because it has the force of history in it. How does a poet resolve this dualism when Wordsworth's vision is dead, Shelley's transcendental solution suspect, and Blake's transfiguration impossible? The weight of historic process includes the experience of the romantic movement's decline and, as Hallam said, repentance is unlike innocence. Yeats, for historical reasons alone, could not recapture the radical innocence of Blake. A later Yeats might observe that the two views of nature in those poems are "self-born mockers of man's enterprise" but to recognize the fact is not to resolve it, for it is a fact in living history and contemporary man must live within its "fiction." "The Wanderings of Oisin" presents the imaginative act, timeless, yet always dying into time. It also presents an allegory of history's periods of imagination, now declined into the slumber of modern times, but whose vigour can be renewed, like the individual imaginative act, in the consciousness of a nation.

CHAPTER V

DAWN AND SUNSET

"Oisin," we have argued, was an ambitious performance, both a culmination of the allegorical themes of earlier poems and verse plays and a prophetic announcement for a neo-romantic movement in Irish literature. Our reading of that poem provides a useful framework for an understanding of the essential coherence of the wide range of Yeats' literary activity during the subsequent decade and suggests among other things, new interpretations for his plays written or published in the first decade of the twentieth century. The range of Yeats' writing during the 1890's was extensive and there is a considerable experiment in varied styles. The poetry of that decade is markedly distinct from the style of "Oisin" where a "gusty energy" had prevailed. The Rose and The Wind Among the Reeds display the influence of a new aesthetic discipline derived from Pater and the Rhymers. What "Oisin" had held in loose confluence became separated in the 1890's into the poems, plays, stories, novels, and critical prose. The context for appreciating this wide range of literary activity is, we suggest, the epic intent which produced "Oisin." Not that the premature synthesis of "Oisin" is a blueprint for categorizing Yeats' writing in the 1890's; it is proposed, however, that the impulse behind the grand plan of "Oisin" continued after its publication and that the wide spectrum of Yeats' work in that decade was the result of that impulse refracted by a new aesthetic

discipline and by the experiences with the practical difficulties of promoting a "neo-romantic movement."

When "Oisin" was re-issued in 1895 with the revisions which we noted earlier, it was prefaced by the epigraph

> Give me the world if Thou wilt, but grant me
> an asylum for my affections.

The reader was now directed to view the poem as a flight into fairyland. The relevance of the poem as a commitment to race, a commitment which no reviewer of that poem recognized,[1] was disguised further by this epigraph. The poem was now presumably to be read as thematically akin to Yeats' recent play The Land of Hearts' Desire, as an asylum from the strenuous public world of committee work and article writing which promoted that neo-romantic movement. The poem which had been composed so deliberately as "poetry of incident" was now encouraged to be read as poetry depicting a "state of mind," as a retreat like that thicket at Howth in the midst of three roads. The revised and re-issued "Oisin" of 1895 plays down the poet-figure as a modern deliverer. In the previous year, Yeats had begun work again on the play The Shadowy Waters. This work, whose hero Forgael was a Shelleyan hero of the antithetical quest, had first been projected in 1884. Work on it was stopped when the poet met O'Leary in 1885 and subsequently committed himself to writing "Oisin," a work whose inspiration and theme, we have argued, was in deliberate opposition to the subjectivism of The Shadowy Waters. By

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[1] Of the nine reviews which I have been able to locate only Todhunter's in The Academy (March 30, 1889) suggested that the reader should consider symbolic significance: "In all these poems an idea underlies the fantastic imagination--more is meant than meets the ear. 'The Seeker' in particular arrests the reader with its strange challenge of its symbolic meaning." p. 216.

1894, the influence of Pater and the Rhymer poets and the frustrating experience of Yeats' struggle to define and direct a popular yet artistically distinguished Irish literary renaissance persuaded the poet to sail with Forgael away from the landscape of an embittered Irish literary scene. Forgael is a voyager towards a world of essences, towards a transcendental world of personal salvation in a direction utterly opposed to Oisin's. The play, despite repeated attempts, was not completed until after the turn of the century. There are many reasons for this: the changing relations with Maud Gonne made the characterization and role of Dectora difficult, and the dramatic mode offered problems. We are concerned with the thematic relevance of the play as it is related to the contrary inspiration of "Oisin," however, and the difficulty of the composition can also be explained as symptomatic of the poet's vacillation between two allegiances. Indeed the most characteristic poet-figure of Yeats during the years 1896 to 1898 would seem to be Bran. In George Moore's novel Evelyn Innes, Yeats is portrayed sympathetically and with intended realism as Ulric Deane who displays what could only be called an obsessive preoccupation with the Bran legend. Bran vacillated between the personal desires of a Forgael and the racial commitment of Oisin. He too had been summoned to Tir-nà-nOg, but he neither remained there nor returned to the bitterness of Ireland; rather, he sailed indecisively around the island.

Oisin's commitment to public battle in contemporary Ireland is evident in articles and reviews that Yeats, the "public man," engaged in during the 1890's. The poetry of that decade, despite Yeats' claim to "be counted one/with Davis, Mangan, Ferguson," is well removed, however,

from the turbulence and direct contest of The Island of Battles. A new aesthetics disavowed the style of "Oisin's" "gusty energy" and proposed as its model of excellence the lyric mode, intense, "pure" poetry chastened of every kind of rhetorical appeal. In The Rose and The Wind Among the Reeds, an elaborate, ritualistic and symbol-laden poetry reflects Yeats' sense of the poet as an aesthetic hero, as a "priest of the imagination." Around this poetry, so circumscribed by the influence of Pater and the Rhymers, swirled the tumultuous inspiration of O'Grady's "histories" and the gusty energy of Yeats' articles of the decade.

Forgael's difficulty in severing himself from Ireland and Bran's circumspect sailing along the coastline are illustrative of Yeats' unwillingness to sacrifice the homeric hero for an aesthetic hero. In 1896, while he was still struggling with The Shadowy Waters, he was also piloting another project, the purchase of an "island of heroes" in County Roscommon. On this island a mystic society (for which Yeats was writing an elaborate ritual) would take up residence. This island was to be, ambiguously enough, a retreat, a citadel of defiance, and the birth-place of a new religion. Its ambiguous character can be equated to Bran's vacillation. To interpret this project simply as an aesthete's retreat would be erroneous, for we can recall how earlier islands in Yeats' poetry were imaginative states which prophecied a Shelleyan revolution, and we can recall our interpretation of The Island of Statues as a prelude to "Oisin," whose protagonist is an homeric, racial hero. Yeats' ambitions and aggressiveness during his early career have usually been overlooked, or discounted in the interests of portraying his Rhymer period as a convenient foil for a later "realism." It is instructive to

keep "Oisin" in mind when reading a review written in 1896, in the same year that the Magus Yeats was planning this "island of heroes." The review, of Robert Bridge's The Return of Ulysses, recreates for the reader the passionate commitment of "Oisin," a commitment which was still ambitiously held, however much the Rhymer poet might disguise it. Bridge's modern dramatization of the Homeric story captivated Yeats by its "leaping and clamorous speech."[2] The return of Ulysses to rescue a Penelope and a Kingdom from suitors (surely such suitors are the journalists and the wooers of a false literary tradition) recreates a scene which Book Two of "Oisin" had dwelt upon with a savage joy: "As I read, the gathering passion overwhelms me as it did when Homer himself was the singer, and when I read at last the lines in which the maid describes to Penelope the battle with the suitors, at which she looks through an open door, I tremble with excitement."[3] The suppressed excitement experienced from verse which "compels that great tide of song to flow through delicate dramatic verse, with little abatement of its own leaping and clamorous speech"[4] is the excitement of experiencing the passionate theme of "Oisin" presented in a style purged of the Hugo manner, since rejected by Yeats. The passionate values proposed repeatedly in Yeats' articles and reviews as the essential qualities of the Celtic imagination were experienced now in Bridge's dramatic verse where, Yeats felt, an admirable artistry channelled and directed the flow of energy.

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[2]"The Return of Ulysses," Essays and Introductions, p. 199.

[3]Ibid., p. 199.

[4]Ibid., p. 199.

It is, understandably, in the language of Pater that Yeats describes the aesthetic purity of Bridge's expression which "has wisdom for fruit, and is of a kind with the ecstasy of the seers, an altar flame, unshaken by the winds of the world, and burning every moment with whiter and purer brilliance."[5]

That Yeats shared a good many of Pater's ideas on style, on the intimate relation of art and the historic sensibility, and on the contemporary condition of the modern artistic consciousness has been abundantly illustrated by critics such as Whitaker, Engelberg, and Melchiori, to name only a few.[6] Whether Pater was Yeats' source for many of these ideas or simply an influential corroborator is not of concern now. It is recognized that Yeats probably absorbed (through his Pre-Raphaelite environment) many of the ideas which Pater so masterfully articulated. His first known reading of Pater in 1889, the re-readings of The Renaissance and Marius the Epicurean in the early 90's and the daily contact with Lionel Johnson (an attractive disciple of Pater for Yeats), might seem in that event, to be simply the confirmation of a direction in which Yeats was inevitably moving. If we read "Oisin" as Professor Bloom does, as a poem of the "antithetical quester," and not, as we have argued, as a poem which determinedly rejected the subjective world and committed itself to the contemporary moment of the racial life,

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[5] Ibid., p. 200.

[6] Certain aesthetic ideals may or may not have had their "source" in Pater, but there seems to be little doubt that his persuasive aestheticism was a continuing influence on Yeats. Reference has already been made to Whitaker's and Engelberg's books. Georgi Melchiori's The Whole Meaning of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the World of W. B. Yeats (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) is especially rich in tracing similarities.

then the influence of Pater would be of more limited importance. But because we have seen in that poem the announcement of a neo-romantic movement wherein Yeats "turned his back on foreign themes, (and) decided that the race was more important than the individual," the subsequent influence of Pater was crucial.

When Yeats met Maud Gonne soon after the publication of "Oisin" in the spring of 1889, he expressed an ambition to be an "Irish Victor Hugo" commending himself, Hone suggests, "by claiming a very public and declamatory talent, for her beauty as he saw it in those days seemed incompatible with private intimate life."[7] This claim, we have argued, was truthful enough as a description of the intent of "Oisin," but already, in 1889, Yeats "was full of the thoughts of the 'Animula Vagula' chapter in Marius..."[8] His aesthetic education under Pater would have made him question, as did Marius, his dedication to a theoretical end and to abstract ideals which were as much political as literary. Yeats found that his allegiance to a public literary cause involved him in a dilemma in that such service demanded the sacrificing or the compromising of the ideal aesthetic sensibility which Pater, in Marius, had so sensitively defined. Marius urged him to "make the most of what was 'here and now'" and articulated so persuasively the artistic conscience which should ensure, "in the actual dimness of ways from means to ends--ends in themselves desirable...that the means...should have something of finality or perfection about them..."[9] For the young poet who had sought

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[7]Hone, W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939, p. 68.

[8]Ibid., p. 68.

[9]Walter Pater, Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas (London: MacMillan, 1924), p. 111.

to "hammer" his "thoughts into unity" and who had elected to find himself by giving himself to the racial life, Pater was both attractive and threatening. He presented both the harmonious richness and the essential isolation of the subjective man. Marius was re-read in the summer of 1891,[10] its "golden sentences, laden with a sleepy sunlight" are referred to in an article of the fall of that year wherein Pater's speculations in Marius' "jewelled paragraphs" are related to "Irish literature and Irish thought."[11] Marius was for the Rhymer Yeats "our contemporary classic."[12] For the Rhymer, "poets with whom I learned my trade," Pater was the acknowledged master, the very conscience of artistic integrity. In view of the conflict Yeats had long felt between the competing demands of service to a public literary cause and his earliest instinct of the subjectivity of all truth, the influence was most important. In Marius, Pater accentuated the problem of the subjective with such persuasion, and identified this condition with the pure, intense artistic sensibility so closely, that he heightened in Yeats' mind the dualism which "Oisin" had temporarily resolved. Mankind lives between two eternities, that of race and that of soul, reflected a later Yeats. "Oisin" had presented Yeats' choice, but the debate between the two responsibilities continued. In the following pages we will consider Yeats' critical prose published over the period 1886 to 1901, and define some of the essential themes in this debate. We will, subsequently, discuss the allegory of The Secret Rose as it relates to these themes.

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[10]Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 307.

[11]Letters to the New Island, p. 137.

[12]Jeffares, p. 99.

Finally, in the light of these readings we will propose some new interpretations of the play The Shadowy Waters.

The articles and reviews published between 1886 and 1901 can be analyzed for evidence of Yeats' changing aesthetic values, his changing attitudes towards "coterie" poetry and "popular" poetry, and his growing awareness of the difficulty of expressing a renaissant Irish literature in the idiom of the English language. The ages of literature, which we have argued is an important theme in "Oisin," had identified Ireland's present phase as being epical, or ballad, distinct from English literature's late, lyrical phase. The earlier (yet contemporary) Irish phase Yeats termed "popular" as opposed to the later English phase which he had described as personal and subjective--its poets forming "coteries" characteristic of a literature of old age. We have discussed Yeats' 1886 essay on Ferguson already at some length and it need not be reviewed now. We can, however, provide corroborative evidence that the values and schematization presented in that essay were not peculiar to it, but rather were representative of Yeats' mind while he was composing "Oisin."

The other article written in 1886 proposed to distinguish, like the Ferguson article, the essential character of contemporary Irish literature. In "The Poetry of R. D. Joyce" Yeats made a broad distinction in the interests of his argument and divided poets

> ...into two classes. First, those who--like Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth--investigate what is obscure in emotion, and appeal to what is abnormal in man, or become the healers of some particular disease of the spirit. During their lifetime they write for a clique, and leave after them a school. And second, the bardic class--the Homers and Hugos, the Burns and Scotts--who sing

> of the universal emotions...They do not write for a clique, or leave after them a school, for they sing for all men.[13]

Joyce, Yeats proposes, with the extravagance of his zeal for Irish distinctiveness, belongs with the Homeric company.

The major theme of "Miss Tynan's New Book," a review written in July of 1887, is her poetry's new Irish character: "The Pre-Raphaelite mannerism and alien methods of thought that obscured the nationality of Miss Tynan's first volume are here almost entirely absent."[14] A review of January 1888, "The Prose and Poetry of Wilfred Blunt" associates Blunt's political liberalism in India (which Yeats describes as "that perhaps other Ireland") with a writing style of "barbaric sincerity."[15] The term "sincerity" excused for Yeats at this time a multitude of stylistic faults. In "Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland," published in November, 1889, just before the publication of "Oisin" but written two years earlier while Yeats was writing the second book of "Oisin,"[16] an Irish ballad poetry, "of the people" which is "foreign from all modern English ways" is extolled almost simply on that basis alone. These ballads are, Yeats argues, evidence that "the populace and the poets... have one heart," stubbornly asserting a freedom from a "literary class

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[13]Published in The Irish Fireside (Dec. 4, 1886) and reprinted in John Frayne's Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats, Vol. I, First Reviews and Articles 1886-1896 (London: MacMillan, 1970), p. 105. In this chapter, whenever possible, all quotations from articles and reviews are given page references from Frayne's book.

[14]Frayne, p. 120.

[15]Frayne, p. 124.

[16]Wade dates its composition to the year 1887. Wade, p. 43.

with its own way of seeing things and its own conventions."[17] Amid these simplifications which the excitement of a "cause" encouraged in Yeats at this time, there is no apparent recognition of the problem of the common English language which "Irish" poets who had no Gaelic must, perforce, use. The distinctive character of Irish writing is somehow (Yeats does not face the question) free from the medium of its expression, the shared English language. Yeats was attempting to encourage by deliberate effort an art which would be simple and passionate. The conscious striving to shape the literary future by appealing to a naturalness and to a spontaneity of song was not at this time understood as requiring much toil, or much "ceremony" for that innocence to be realized. A Hugo style of "gusty energy" would, he hoped, suffice. He read "history" and legend as O'Grady had, in a thoroughly romantic way. Legend prefigured history just as the imagination "legislated" man's enterprise. In a review of January, 1890, entitled "Bardic Ireland," one can recognize in the "historical" anachronism the imaginative fact of the contemporary cause:

> This power of the bards was responsible, it may be, for one curious thing in ancient Celtic history: its self-consciousness. The warriors were not simply warriors, the Kings simply Kings, the smiths simply smiths: they all seem striving to bring something out of the world of thoughts into the world of deeds...Old Celtic Ireland was full of these conscious strivings.[18]

That future which Yeats wished to bring "out of the world of thoughts into the world of deeds" was to come with the dawn of a neo-

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[17]Frayne, p. 147.

[18]Frayne, p. 164.

romantic movement. Why, we must ask, does the passionate dawn prophecied in these articles and reviews and announced in "Oisin" become, in 1893, the indeterminate half-light of The Celtic Twilight which ambiguously enough, seems as much to be slipping into the yellow dusk of fin-de-siècle English literature as emerging into the day spring of an Irish literary renaissance? What happened was that the extravagant admirer of Hugo joined the Rhymers' Club and studied his Pater. A necessarily naive poet of the sunrise met the sophisticated wisdom of the sunset school, and the "tired sunlight" of Pater's golden sentences gave a datedness even to Golden Dawn occultism. Yeats' original impetus towards renewal, towards a return to the region of a primitive imagination, hurried instead through the Rhymer poets and beyond them through Axel towards an apocalyptic conclusion. There is a direct link between Oisin's battle for renewal and Yeats' quoting with approval Mallarmé's dramatic prophecy. "After us, the savage gods."

There is an observable tempering of an uncritical zeal for a Celtic renaissance even before Yeats' close association with the Rhymers. Perhaps this reflects a more circumspect Yeats, or perhaps, because his views were expressed in Henley's Scots Observer (later National Observer), a Unionist periodical, Yeats may have felt the need for some restraint. An article, "Tales From the Twilight," appearing in the Scots Observer in early 1890, makes a distinction between the witches hour of the Anglo-Saxon world (where witches have been banished to the midnight hour for an unbelieving populace) and "The grey world of the morning...the Irish witches hour." The racial distinction is muted, and presented more as a folk-lore curiosity than as statement upon the contrasting ages or

phases of the imaginative life of two nations. The dawn of twilight "when this world and the other draw near" appears in this article as disarmingly fanciful and that only.[19] A similar hesitancy is evident in a review published in Henley's National Observer in February of 1891. The book Yeats reviews is Douglas Hyde's Beside the Fire: A Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories.

> Mr. Hyde bids us know that all this exultant world of fancy is passing away, soon to exist for none but stray scholars and the gentlemen of the sun-myth. He has written on his title page this motto from an old Gaelic poem: 'They are like a mist on the coming of night that is scattered away by a light breath of wind.' I know that this is a common belief of folk-lorists but I do not feel certain that it is absolutely true.[20]

Yeats treats with respect the scholar's reputation, satisfying himself in merely suggesting another position, and in displaying his acquaintance with contemporary anthropological explanations.

In 1891 Yeats helped found the Rhymers' Club, and in an April 1892 article, "The Rhymers' Club," introduced that literary group to the readers of The Boston Pilot. The poet of the Celtic dawn attempts in this article to find an ally in the poetry of the English sunset. The Rhymers are recognized as searching "for new subject matter, new emotions, which so clearly marks the reaction from that search for new forms merely which distinguished the generation now going out."[21] One can recognize in this evaluation the aesthetic opportunities proposed by Pater in The Renaissance where he suggests that contemporary art "win

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[19]Frayne, p. 173.

[20]"Irish Folk Tales," Frayne, p. 189.

[21]Letters to the New Island, p. 144.

for itself a new Kingdom of sensation and thought." For his expatriate Irish readers Yeats still contrasts the promising future of a "young" Irish literature (Todhunter providing the example) with the "old" and largely depleted tradition of English literature, but he does not propose to his readers a relationship between two contemporary movements in literature other than their shared dismissal of "the generation now going out." Later in the same year, in an article "Hopes and Fears For Irish Literature," the essential issue of relating the two new literary movements which share a common language is more squarely faced. The article, published in United Ireland, a nationalist paper, is strongly propagandistic for the cause of the new and vigorous Irish literature, and presents the Rhymer aesthetic values as belonging to a school of the sunset where poetry is an end in itself. The aesthetic purity of the Rhymer ideal had "nothing to do with thought, nothing to do with philosophy, nothing to do with life, nothing to do with anything but the music of cadence, and beauty of phrase," and belongs to an age which is getting "old and feeble." The new Irish poetry, however, for all its promise, has the limitations of its youthfulness: "We have the limitations of the dawn. They have the limitations of the sunset. We also in the coming centuries will grow into the broad noon and pass on into twilight and darkness." These limitations are a corollary to its youthfulness: "...side by side with this robustness and rough energy of ours there goes most utter indifference to art, the most dire carelessness." And R. D. Joyce, whose work Yeats had extravagantly valued in 1886, is now bluntly criticized for sometimes being "without any art." The style of "gusty energy" which marked Yeats' entry into the Irish literary

movement has by now been rejected. A patient, toilsome art is now proposed in its place: "He who would belong to things eternal must for the most part renounce his alloted place amid the things of time."[22] Clearly the Zeitgeist of 1886 is being re-examined and criticized for its stylistic deficiencies.

The question of the possibility of rendering an authentic Irish character in the English language had recently been raised by Douglas Hyde. Hyde had stressed the intimate relation between language and culture and had proposed that the expression of the specific Gaelic sensibility could only be rendered in the Gaelic language. Yeats' published letter in a December issue of United Ireland[23] was an answer to Hyde's speech, "The De-Anglicizing of Ireland," an answer which commended the proposals to preserve the Gaelic language but which denied that the future of Irish literature depended upon its survival. In answer to Hyde, Yeats could only parade forth once again writers such as O'Grady and Ferguson, writers about whose style Yeats had now considerable reservations.

The central problem which Yeats had soon to face was how to relate a neo-romantic movement of Irish literature which would express the living reality of its epic sensibility to the living texture of an English language which was in a later phase and whose poetic mode, appropriate to its age, was lyrical and subjective. How, in other words, could a poetry of the dawn find its expression in a language of the sunset? Yeats' growing awareness of the problem prompted a lengthy

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[22]Frayne, pp. 248-250.

[23]Frayne, pp. 254-255.

theoretic schematization of the "general course of literary development" in an article of May 1893, "Nationality and Literature." This article, like "Hopes and Fears For Irish Literature," was written for publication in United Ireland, and the exhortatory nationalist concern somewhat begs the essential question at issue, which was the expression of the Irish consciousness in something other than anachronistic English. In this article, Yeats reviews the "necessary" stages of a literature's growth and decline to illustrate the separate phases of English and Irish literature. But, in this article at least, where even a linguistic emphasis on the Anglo-Irish fact might seem more "Unionist" than "Nationalist," he does not define how Irish literature could be both distinctive and true to its genius and phase while expressing itself in English. He only states that Irish writers can learn from an older English literature without impairing the youthful energy of their phase. The problems of contemporaneity are not explored. The description of the state of contemporary English literature is presented with a sympathy which evidences Yeats' personal involvement with the Rhymer aesthetics. The description differs notably from the hitherto usual caricature of an "old and feeble" literature. With the Rhymer "movement" in mind, Yeats describes a hierarchic literature with its new, subtle consciousness: "With this advancing subtlety poetry steps out of the market place, out of the general tide of life and becomes a mysterious cult, as it were, an almost secret religion made by the few for the few."[24] Five months before, writing in the Bookman to another audience, Yeats referred to the problem of the modern poets who were "heavily

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[24]Frayne, p. 271.

handicapped by being born in a lyrical age, and thereby compelled for the most part to break up their inspiration into many glints and glimmers, instead of letting it burn in one steady flame."[25] Behind this description is Pater's aesthetic spirit, whose integrity could transform a worn out European literature in its "golden sunset" into a pure, intense flame.

Yeats' bitter experience with the promotion of the circulating library scheme, an experience described at length in the Autobiographies, increased his sense of the disparity between his literary ideals and the popular reality. The protracted struggle with those who supported Duffy heightened Yeats' sense of the problem of his allegiance both to a "popular" art and to an art of aesthetic purity. The one seemed so readily to become vulgar and rhetorical, the other to cut itself off from the racial life and to become "an end in itself."

Yeats' sense of opposite paths prompted the antithetical formulation presented in a review of Ibsen's Brand in the October, 1894 issue of The Bookman. Entitled "The Stone and the Elixir," this review defines the essential character of Brand as the anti-type to Peer Gynt. The philosopher's stone turns all to gold, the elixir turns all to nothingness, and "One might take these contraries as symbols of the minds of Brand and Peer Gynt." Yeats' divided selves are readily seen in his description of the "popular" Peer Gynt who is "now a hunter, now a troll, now a merchant until the true Peer Gynt is well-nigh dissolved," and Brand who "seeks to rise into an absolute world...and to transmute by the force of his unchanging ideal everything about him into imperishable

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[25]"The Death of Oenone," The Bookman (Dec. 1892), Frayne, p. 251.

gold."[26] 1894 is also the year in which Yeats began work again on The Shadowy Waters. The understanding of Yeats' sense of divided allegiance explains much of the shadowy symbolism of that work. We shall analyze this symbolism shortly.

Yeats in early 1895 felt himself to be in the middle, between the contesting demands of opposite allegiances, between a commitment to the dawn and to the sunset. It is not unexpected to read in a review of O'Grady's The Coming of Cuculain in February of that year a phrase symptomatic of Yeats' attempt to straddle divergent epochs of the imagination. These "tumultuous" stories of the heroic age "belong in nothing to our labouring noontide, but wholly to the shadowy morning twilight of time."[27] The labour of achieving a style purged of rhetoric and yet vigorous and direct remained a problem. As a later Yeats recalled "...I was sometimes made wretched by the thought that I knew of no kind of English that fitted them [the stories of The Celtic Twilight] as the language of Morris' prose stories...I knew of no language to write about Ireland in but raw modern English."[28] A series of further articles in 1895 considered the problem of finding the English idiom which would express satisfactorily Yeats' conception of the essential character of the Irish phase without being alien or anachronistic. In the July number of The Bookman we read,

> A young Englishman of little knowledge or power may write with considerable skill and perfect good taste before he leaves his university, while an

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[26]Frayne, p. 344.

[27]"Battles Long Ago," The Bookman (Feb. 1895), Frayne, p. 351.

[28]"Cuchulain of Muirthemne," Explorations, p. 4. My brackets.

> Irishman of greater power and language will go through half his life piling up in the one heap the trivial and the memorable, the incoherent and the beautiful, the commonplace and the simple.

And,

> ...the more we understand the impossibility of putting our new wine into old bottles, the longer is our struggle with the trivial, the incoherent, the uncomely.

The bulk of Irish nationalist writers, because of their service to a cause,

> turned away from the unfolding and developing Irish tradition, and borrowed the modern English methods of utterance...[29]

The service to a popular cause had its perils, for the poet could become trivial, incoherent, and uncomely. A certain ritual aloofness was desirable, and the poet's function came to be seen by Yeats as sacramental, poets being "priests of those Immortal Moods which are the true builders of nations, the secret transformers of the world."[30] Yeats by 1895 was moving towards a reversal of his previous scorn for "coterie" poetry, moving toward the position taken in his 1901 essay "What is 'Popular Poetry'?"[31] In the August number of The Bookman Yeats implies there is a need for a coterie poetry, a poetry necessarily "unpopular"

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[29]"Irish National Literature, I, From Callanan to Carleton," Frayne, pp. 360-361.

[30]Ibid., p. 361.

[31]In this essay, Yeats, by redefinition, reconciled the antagonism he had long described between "popular" and "coterie" poetry. "...popular poetry never came from the people at all," but rather from "middle class" writers like Longfellow and Macauley. Essays and Introductions, p. 5. "...the counting house had created a new class and a new art...and set this art and this class between the hut and the castle." Ibid., p. 10.

with the journalist world whose literature is but "the scullery maid of politics." A small group of poets, with whom Yeats associates himself, hope to fashion "a new ritual for the builders of peoples, the imperishable moods." In this same issue Yeats refers to a myth which as he says "has haunted him all winter." In the myth Aedh, a poet-figure, is sacrificed in the temple of heroes that the land may be delivered from famine. Aedh stands surrounded by demands for his youth, his love, his knowledge, his hope, his dreams, his heart.[32] The fate of a Peer Gynt (and concern of the poet-figure Aleel in The Countess Cathleen) is behind the haunting significance of Aedh's martyrdom.

The poetry of "moods" is the poetry of essences, of the pure states of being encouraged by the Rhymer aesthetic values. However, Yeats, interested in extending the subject matter of poetry well beyond the confines of late nineteenth-century aestheticism, attempted to transform these psychological states, the sensations of Pater's inner world, into metaphysical entities, into the "imperishable moods, the builders of nations." Yeats was clearly moving towards a theory of the Anima Mundi. The epic range of his subject matter is evident enough in the revealing phrase "builders of peoples," but the epic themes which Yeats' critical prose of the decade describes as vehement, tumultuous, immeasurable, and vast were too tumultuous and vast to be expressed in the narrow confines of the lyric mode, the mode of pure English poetry which Yeats' aesthetic convictions prescribed. That lyric mode was moving (along with revised drafts of The Shadowy Waters) towards its

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[32]"Irish National Literature, II, Contemporary Prose Writers--Mr. O'Grady, Miss Lawless, Miss Barlow, Miss Hopper, and the Folk-lorists," The Bookman (Aug. 1895), Frayne pp. 367-373.

culmination in The Wind Among the Reeds published in 1899.[33] Yeats could not in 1897 employ the verse narrative mode of an "Oisin," a mode supple and varied enough to entertain the vast worlds of his epic inspiration, because the subsequent aesthetic convictions demanded of his poetry a purity of form which seemed attainable only in the brevity of the lyric. The ideal of an epic poem, like a "vast world moulded" by its "own weight," remained beyond the possibility of execution. There are two pieces of criticism, however, one a review of 1897, the other an article of the following year, which revealed momentarily a backward glance at "Oisin," the poem which so ambitiously attempted the performance of the epic. The review, "Living Poets: Mr. Robert Bridges" already noted under its republished title "The Return of Ulysses," appeared in the June issue of The Bookman and presented a Yeats "trembling" with excitement at the modern rendering of Ulysses' Homeric return to Ithaca and his slaying of the suitors, assisted by "Athene helmed in silver or electron."[34] What has connected here to fire Yeats' excited response is the meeting of the goddess and man, the apocalyptic moment towards which a poetry of "pure essences" aspired, and the Homeric racial action of purging the homeland of time-serving journalists. It is Oisin slaying the demon again. The article, "The Autumn of the

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[33]The ambiguity of the twilight of dawn and dusk allowed Yeats to attempt to reconcile two otherwise distinct contemporary movements. In "The Autumn of the Body," he writes that he sees "...in the art of every country those faint lights and fair colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call 'the decadence' and which I, because I believe the arts lie dreaming of things to come, prefer to call the autumn of the body." Essays and Introductions, p. 191.

[34]The Bookman (June 1897), p. 64.

Body," discusses the future of poetry.

> Mr. Symons understands...that poetry will henceforth be a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little and intense poems. I think there will be much poetry of this kind... but I think we will not cease to write long poems, but rather that we will write them more and more as our new belief makes the world plastic under our hands again.

It is undoubtedly with Oisin and Bridge's Ulysses in mind that Yeats continues, "I think that we will learn again how to describe at great length an old man wandering among enchanted islands, his return home at last, his slow-gathering vengeance, a flitting shape of a goddess and a flight of arrows..."[35]

We propose that the stories in The Secret Rose can be analyzed as allegories of the themes which we have reviewed in Yeats' critical writing. Their aesthetic accomplishment lies mainly with their style, a style which is ornately patterned, ritualistic, ceremonious. Yeats' intent may have been to write a decorative art of such elaboration that "form" would be "lost in pattern." Such is his contemporary definition of his method of symbolism as he saw it distinguished from Blake's. The themes and style of the group of stories culminate in "Rosa Alchemica," a story which Yeats has said was shaped utterly by Pater and Axel.[36] In that story the narrator states his fascination with Alchemists who sought "the transmutation of life into art" and who expressed that "measureless desire for a world of essences." One can appreciate the alchemical style: Yeats was attempting to transmute the "raw English"

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[35] Essays and Introductions, pp. 193-194.

[36] Auto., pp. 320-321.

of his earlier prose manner into the "golden sentences" of Pater. However, the result falls short of a transfiguring art for its "form" is never quite "lost in pattern," and that form is allegory. The alchemical theme repeated in the stories where Irish topography is alchemically translated into a landscape of art, a "world of essences," is a process which is described only; it is not enacted. In terms of their "content" (and we insist that they have the extractable content of all allegory), we are dealing with representational emblems, not with transfiguring symbols. Thus their autobiographical elements, the aesthetic themes of the "plots," and the allegorical landscapes and gardens can be analyzed without incurring the charge of treating these stories reductively.

In these stories[37] can be seen the emergent debate between spokesmen for the Life and spokesmen for the Work. More specifically, in terms of Yeats' contemporary concern, these stories review the problem which "Oisin" had momentarily resolved, the problem of the divided allegiance to "two eternities," that of the self and that of the race. In four of the stories, a boy serves a master, an old man who pursues "wisdom." The Shelleyan poet-figure of Yeats' earliest verse, that of a youth prematurely grey, had been an attractive and romantically mysterious figure for Yeats who aspired early to a Magus role. What had been a fanciful self-dramatization, however, became more grimly a real experience. Yeats, having deliberately dedicated his life to the "work" of a national art which would give voice to the racial life, composed "Oisin," and the arduous toil demanded a sacrifice of years of his youth, a

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[37]The text referred to in this analysis is from Mythologies.

sacrifice imaged in the return of Oisin from a Tir-nà-nOg of the Imagination to a debilitating old age in Ireland. The labour of composing the poem made the identification with the poet-figure Oisin an earned experience. In a letter to Katherine Tynan on the subject of its composition, Yeats declared that he had "poured" his "life" into its labour, and had become an observer of the life that others lived. The servant-master relationship presented in several of the stories of The Secret Rose is very autobiographical.

In "Out of the Rose," the youth figure is an audience for a Knight who, having heard the divine voice speaking from an envisioned "Rose of Fire," has devoted his life to denouncing an age where men "turn from the light of their own hearts and bow down before outer order and fixity." The modern idolatry of a scientific "Wordsworthian" age had been mocked in Book One of "Oisin" and Yeats, as a Knight of subjective truth, has since studied Blake and Rosicrucian philosophy. This Knight is interesting as a re-appearance of the Knight in "The Seeker," that "star-led wanderer" whose service to the subjective quest had ended in grim irony. This earlier poet-figure, who had denied the greater and more enduring society of race, met the witch "Infamy" at his death. In the later story, however, the Knight is no antithetical questor; he has spent a lifetime in active public opposition to a society which was subservient to "outer order and fixity." His mission was social, if somewhat paradoxical and difficult. The "boy," who is indifferent to the Knight's dying gospel, is distracted by a cock's crow. His indifference is ambiguous: it is perhaps the life of simple nature which is superior in its ignorance of philosophy, or it is the inevitable

condition of indifference which any idealism must finally face. The cock's crow is undoubtedly ironic, but it too is ambiguous, and its signalling of a denial may be applied to the boy, to the Knight, or ironically to both in that each serves a partial truth.

In "The Heart of the Spring" the youth of seventeen years has spent the last five years serving an old man, again a seeker of ultimate wisdom. The youth prepares, under the elder's instruction for the latter's hopeful union with the "Great Secret." The youth's service is clearly autobiographical in several of its details. From Yeats' Autobiographies we recall his memories of working at the British Museum, too fatigued to lift the heavy volumes from the shelves. The boy in this story affirms his duty: "It is my life to keep the fire alight... and to take down the heavy books from the shelves..." The boy, like the youthful Yeats of 1887, turned his privations into deliberate fasts, sacrificing the body to the pursuit of wisdom. In an elaborate ceremony which we will later discuss for its allegory, the boy assists in the old man's preparation for the apocalyptic moment of Truth. At this moment the old man believes he will become "as young" as the boy. A unity of being will be realized and the two figures effectively identified. The old man's mastery over nature leads, however, to his death. Whether he withers or blossoms into another truth is left ambiguous, but the story concludes with the boy's reflecting over his body that perhaps it were "better for him to have said his prayers" to a more orthodox power than to have pursued an occult wisdom. Outside the window of the house a bird sings "out of the heart of the spring," in ironic commentary on the search for wisdom. It is not an alchemical golden bird, "out of nature,"

yet singing of what is past, or passing, or to come. The story ends with its pattern of antitheses.

In "Where There is Nothing, There is God," we have the corollary to the youth-old man relationship. In this story, the boy, Olioll, is quite autobiographical: his "stupidity" as a pupil of conventional schooling is explained, for he is "born of a mind that could listen to every wandering sound and brook upon every wandering light." An old beggarman, unconventional ancient wisdom, pities the boy and teaches him Rosicrucian truths. Upon the boy's initiation into this wisdom, the scent of roses fills the air. But, as the title states, ultimate wisdom is incompatible with life. The paradox remains at the level of dilemma; there is no development of a theory of cyclic renewal when Divinity's burning of the world with a kiss would initiate an apocalyptic renewal.

In the stories where the two selves of Yeats (the figures of youth and age) are presented, there is an aesthetic patterning of the contrary worlds of nature and art. In them we observe how Yeats, labouring in the noontide of his life, defined its tensions through these presentations of youth and age. In two other stories the divided selves are given the unity of a single protagonist who is defined largely in terms of his distinctiveness in, or opposition to, contemporary society. The protagonists in "The Wisdom of the King" and "The Old Men of the Twilight" are poet-figures and both have their lineage with a race of bird-men, a metaphor for the species "poet." The bird was an early and continuing metaphor of Yeats for the poet and behind these protagonists is the never completed autobiography, The

Speckled Bird, which Yeats was writing during the same period. Published extracts from the manuscript illustrate the strong theme of the alienation of the poet.[38]

In "The Wisdom of the King," the poet-King, son of the "High Queen of Ireland," reigns uneasily over a populace who fear his grey hawk feathers. His subjects try to disguise the distinctiveness of their King by a conventional emulation of his feathers; they take to wearing artificially a cosmopolitan plumage gathered from "the countries round." The King, it becomes obvious, presides over a Kingdom of art. His lineage and his wisdom, which have the sanction of his miraculous adoption by the spirit world, are ironically alienating virtues for his mundane subjects. Marked from his cradle for his poet's vocation, the youthful King, like Yeats, studied occult correspondence "and became busy with strange and subtle thought, distinctions between things long held the same, resemblances of things long held different." But his "strange words that made ordinary joys nothing" produced only dissatisfaction among citizens who were not of his kind. Even the idealists among them, men like Yeats' nationalist friends, who "had long served a good cause," became dissatisfied with their ideals and lost their simple ardor. A woman whom the King loved feared his hawk feathers and sought the love of a more natural man.[39] Like Forgael in the 1896 unpublished

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[38]The two published extracts are Curtis Bradford's "The Speckled Bird: A Novel by W. B. Yeats," Irish Writing: W. B. Yeats, a Spiral Number of 'Irish Writing', ed. S. J. White (Dublin: Trumpet Books, 1955), and Joseph Hone's "A Brief Excerpt from Yeats's The Speckled Bird," The Bell (Dublin, March 1941).

[39]Ellmann, in Yeats: The Man and the Masks, points out the reference to Maud Gonne. p. 79.

version of The Shadowy Waters who heard in the cries of the birds over his ship the voices of immortal desire, and who had sought the impossible, to bring his ship's company to a harbour of imperishable life, this king leaves his Dectora and his reign to journey alone.

In "The Old Men of the Twilight" the theme of the poet's distinctiveness and plight is rendered through a modification of an Irish legend. The kingly attribute of hawk feathers (later to reappear in the imagery of On Baile's Strand) is, in this story which has the irony of much folk-lore, replaced by the heron image. The legend which had for Yeats a contemporary appropriateness, is set in the time of Patrick. The saint has just converted the high King of Ireland and has silenced the voice of nature in the land, enjoining all men in the duty of "enduring eternity with patience." Only the poets, who have long since disinherited themselves by their pedantry, disturb the religious silence by their wrangling over the relative merits of rhyme and assonance, syllable and accent. Their noise disturbs Patrick, who changes them into herons, condemned to a hopeless subjectivism (they ponder in silence their images in the grey pools), and to the confusion of Hodos Chameliontis ("you shall not be certain about anything for ever and ever"). Because they have lived, says Patrick, "where the feet of angels cannot touch your heads nor the hair of the demons sweep your feet soles" they are condemned to an indeterminate limbo.

A modern Irish literature which refuses its rightful inheritance of epic subject matter and limits itself to exercises of poetic forms stands condemned to imaginative sterility. But the fertility of Irish myth and legend, so "tumultuous and vast," is itself incoherent and

confusing, and needs a philosophic system to organize its potential for poetry. It is not a workable tradition without an organizing discipline. But what system can evolve from the subjective condition of pool-gazing poets? A philosophy of the subjectivity of truth (as propagandized by the Knight of "Out of the Rose") can lead itself to the confusing maze of thought, the Hodos Chameliontis of occultism. In the critical prose which we have reviewed, the modern shapelessness in "art" is a repeated theme. In the stories of The Secret Rose the theme is presented frequently. Olioll, the boy given to wandering reverie, listening to every "wandering sound" and brooding upon every "wandering light", desires the coherence of a master philosophy. The boy in "Out of the Rose" is easily distracted by the cry of a bird. In "The Heart of the Spring" the youth reveals to his master his doubts and fears: the touch of the Sidhe threatens to dissolve the elaborate wisdom he is learning through his apprenticeship. By such antithetical patterning, Yeats repeats the theme of his review, "The Stone and the Elixir."

Between the poetry of the decade and the critical prose lies the prose allegory of The Secret Rose. This work presents the dialogue between youth and age, a dialogue which, in terms of literature, gives voice to a central issue evident in Yeats' critical writings: the problem of relating the imaginative vigour of a poetry of the dawn with the formal excellence of a poetry of the sunset. The ironies and ambiguities of this dialogue as we have described them in our brief analysis offer no theoretical resolution. Nor would one expect such in an art form of this nature. We can, however, review these stories for their presentations of "landscapes of art" and for the allegorical

significance of their plots.

The dominant symbol of the rose in Yeats' poetry of this period is, understandably enough, prevalent in these stories. The book is prefaced by the poem, "To the Secret Rose," which combines in an aspiring Rosicrucian synthesis the pagan and Christian traditions and prophesies the coming consummation of Beauty. In the stories, under the comprehensive symbolism of a garden of art, Yeats expresses the desired synthesis of the varied traditions which made up the contemporary fact of Irish culture. Despite the anticlericalism of "The Old Men of the Twilight" and "The Crucifixion of the Outcast" (which story probably satirizes the Church's persecution of Fenian nationalism and defends heroes like O'Leary)[40] there is an evident attempt made to accept the inevitable Catholic element in the national culture. We can recall that Yeats enlisted the orthodoxy of his friend Lionel Johnson for his movement, and Christian, if not clerical, Ireland always seemed to him to be a potential ally for the spiritual, imaginative life which opposed the alien forces of the nineteenth century materialism. For historical reasons also, Catholic Ireland should be, he felt, a natural ally against both the "curse of Cromwell" and the contemporary Philistinism, its direct descendent.

Three stories, "The Old Men of the Twilight," "The Curse of the Fire and of the Shadows" and "The Heart of the Spring" present a simple, but highly stylized aesthetic history. The sequence in which they appear in Mythologies is in reverse order, and they are separated by

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[40]Philip L. Marcus, "A Fenian Allusion in Yeats," University Review, Dublin, IV (Spring 1967), p. 5.

intervening stories. Because we are here mainly concerned with allegorical patterns, what we can call the emblematic relations between the elements in landscapes or gardens of art, and because we are not attempting to define the occult authority behind them, we shall not pursue the "sources" for what another mode of analysis might term their "symbolic meaning." It is sufficient to recognize Yeats' intention that the emblems in these stories should be read not as "mere fantasies but [as] the signatures of things invisible and ideal."[41]

In the first story, Patrick, as we have noted, transforms the pagan poets into herons and imposes the "objective" sensibility upon the national consciousness. The cleric is characterized much as he was in "Oisin." His is the objective sensibility against which the Knight in "Out of the Rose" battled. Patrick, dressed in white, converts the High King, dressed in red, and effectively controls and directs the passionate life of Pagan Ireland. The allegory of colour is traditional enough, but Yeats may also have had a passage in mind from "White Nights," a chapter in Pater's Marius.[42]

These colours next appear in "The Curse of the Fire and of the Shadows," a story whose setting, like that of "The Heart of the Spring," is Lough Gill near Sligo. The historical setting is the Cromwellian or the Elizabethan devastation of Ireland. Puritan troopers pillage and fire an abbey, and the folk tale upon which this story is based has

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[41]Hone, W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939, p. 111. My brackets.

[42]"'The red rose came first,' says a quaint German mystic, speaking of the mystery of so-called white things, as being 'ever an afterthought--the doubles or seconds of real things...'" Marius the Epicurean, p. 9.

these troopers destroyed by the "shadows," or the spiritual reality, of their crime. The shadows, we may assume, live on in the imaginative life of a physically overpowered Ireland, and it is their energy which Yeats would harness in his struggle to assert an emancipated imaginative life. The formal ordering of white and red initiated by Patrick was maintained by the monks whose garden separates the lilies from the roses objectively enough. During the slaughter of the monks and the firing of the abbey, however, Yeats presents an elaborate interplay of hitherto separated colours and prepares the way, emblematically, for the Rosicrucian synthesis. The monks had affirmed a spiritual reality which subjugated the red rose, but in their martyrdom at the hands of a common spiritual enemy their blood is spilled. They "lay about the altar steps, their white habits stained with blood." They, in effect, belong to the company of national martyrs and it is their blood also, which, as a later poem on Pearse and Connolly affirms, will "make the right rose tree." The red of violence and destruction sears the white sanctity of the altar: "The red tongues of the fire rushed up towards the roof...For a time the altar stood safe and apart in the midst of its white light."

The third story, "The Heart of the Spring," has as its setting this same abbey. The time is the present and the autobiographical nature of the story has already been noted. The old man and the boy build in the ruins of their inheritance. The abbey, "burned down a long while before by sacriligious men of the Queen's party," has been "roofed anew with rushes by the boy, that the old man might find shelter in his last days." The boy, autobiographically enough, has been more

concerned with making clay and wattle cabins in lake-isle retreats, and has neglected to tend the monk's garden of indigenous art. The flowers of the once-ordered garden have, through the action of the soldiers, become mingled with natural landscape.

> ...and the lilies and the roses of the monks had spread out until their confused luxuriance met and mingled with the narrowing circle of the fern. Beyond the lilies and the roses the ferns were so deep that a child walking among them would be hidden from sight...beyond the ferns rose many hazels and small oak-trees.

This "confused luxuriance" is the landscape of arts' subject matter, combining red and white with the green of abundant nature. The plotted garden of formal art is overrun by the prolific, unruly ferns, and overshadowed by the trees of an older tradition. A child walking among them might well be lost unless he had the counsel and the wisdom of the old man. The encircling green is both the vast, tumultuous world of Irish mythology, and for the occultist who would seek to chart its character or define its principles of imaginative power, it is, potentially, a threatening Hodos Chameliontis. The relevance of this landscape as a deliberate image of Yeats' literary inheritance is again suggested by certain autobiographical clues. It may be that the poet who knew his Spenser and who wrote, as we have argued, allegories of art in The Island of Statues, "The Seeker," and in "Oisin," was also influenced by Spenser's numerological interests. In any event, numerology played an important part in Yeats' occult studies, and it may be that the references made to age and to a period of service help to define the significance of this allegorical garden. Although The Secret Rose was published in 1897, Yeats was working on it during the year he

lived with O'Leary near Contarf in 1892.[43] The boy in the story is seventeen and has served his master for five years. If this story was written in 1892, the date of the first collaboration between the two would be 1887, the year when Yeats wrote "Oisin." If the story was written earlier, in 1891, then that date would be 1886, the year of the article on Ferguson which publicly announced Yeats' new dedication to an Irish literary renaissance. Yeats was twenty-one in 1886, and in that year he reversed his literary direction, determined to write of the race and not of the self, and faced his destined anti-self. He may well have presented the 17-5 or 12 as his 21, a reversed sequence quite in keeping with the reversed sequence of the three stories as they were published.

In his preparation for the apocalyptic moment, the old man directs the boy to "bring great masses of green boughs and pile them about the door and the window of my room; and...put fresh green rushes upon the floor, and cover the table and the rushes with the roses and the lilies of the monks." The cutting and ordering of nature brings the exterior landscape into a room which is becoming a palace of art. In the centre stands the altar table covered with the flowers, surrounded, like the garden outside, by the strewn ferns which in turn, again like the exterior, are bordered by the boughs of the hazel and oak. The correspondence is essential for the intended transmutation of nature into art. The sequence of the boy's ritual gathering is also allegorical. Like Yeats, who in 1886 and 1887 gathered green boughs from the wild forest of Irish mythology, the boy first cuts and brings into the room

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[43]Wade, p. 194.

the boughs and ferns. Next he goes "back for the roses and the lilies," which are the blossoms of a cultivated aestheticism associated with the poet's subsequent experience with the aestheticism of Pater and the Rhymer poets. These blossoms are the last flowering of the English sunset phase. Placed over the rushes and reeds of the earlier Irish phase, the dawn and sunset of the Anglo-Irish poet emblematically meet. They await an alchemical rebirth.

When the boy goes back to gather the roses and lilies he sees the landscape under the night sky as if it were "carved of precious stones." In an expectation of the old man's promised miracle, he imagines the scene before him as transformed:

> Sleuth wood away to the south looked as though cut of green beryl, and the waters that mirrored it shone like pale opal. The roses he was gathering were like glowing rubies, and the lilies had the dull lustre of pearl. Everything had taken upon itself the look of something imperishable, except a glowworm...the only thing that seemed perishable as mortal hope. The boy gathered a great armful of roses and lilies, and thrusting the glowworm among their pearl and ruby, carried them into the room.

These jewelled flowers have a perfection which is unnatural, and the glowworm of human hope cannot survive its own creation. The art produced under the old man's direction is a poetry of "essences," as distinct from the epic art which might comprehend the living traditions outside the room. The story concludes ambiguously enough. The old man's death may be an arraignment of that kind of art which, as Yeats said of the Rhymer philosophy, is "an end in itself." The bird's song "out of the heart of spring" asserts joyously the imperfect world of nature. It would take a later Yeats to create the resolving image of Byzantium's

golden bird of art, or the miraculous transformation of Cuchulain into one who had the throat of a bird. The old man's thirst for perfection reflects well enough Yeats' contemporary fascination for an alchemical transmutation of imperfect nature into perfect art. In The Shadowy Waters there is an image of a wood of precious stones which Yeats suggested were "perhaps emotions made eternal by their own perfection."[44] But such perfection in life is impossible. The old man, instead of regaining his youth, dies. His fate is like that of Brand whose "mistake is not less disastrous, though immeasurably nobler, than the mistake of Peer Gynt, for the children of the earth can only live by compromise, by half measures." The old man, considered as an aesthetic hero who will not accept the compromises of an imperfect world, must die. Considered as a poet-figure his fate is one of silence, a silence mocked by a bird's song.

The presentation of the old man walled up within the room may well be a criticism of an inbred aestheticism which divorces art from life. A poetry of essences imaged in the gem-like flowers retreats from the formlessness or waywardness of nature and seeks a perfection beyond it. But in seeking such perfection it can itself become confused, shapeless. In an earlier tale, "The Eaters of the Precious Stones" (published in The Celtic Twilight), there is presented a vision of "the Hell of the artist":

> One day I saw faintly an immense pit of blackness, round which went a circular parapet, and on this parapet sat innumerable apes eating precious stones out of the palms of their hands.

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[44] B. B. Bushrui quotes Yeats. Yeats's Verse Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910 (London: Oxford Press, 1965), p. 9.

> The stones glittered green and crimson, and the apes devoured them with an insatiable hunger. I knew that I saw my own Hell there, the Hell of the artist, and that all who sought after beautiful and wonderful things with too avid a thirst, lost peace and form and became shapeless and common.

The image of subjective narcissism, the "pit of blackness," appears again in another vision included in this tale. Here misshapen creatures "sitting about a black pit such as that in my own Hell" look "at the moon-like reflection of the heavens which shone up from the depths of the pit." These images seem to be related to the shape-changing demon which "Oisin" battled, a demon which, among other things, symbolized for Yeats the Hodos Chameliontis of the subjective man. In "The Eaters of the Precious Stones" we have a prefiguration of "Rosa Alchemica," a tale originally published in The Secret Rose.[45] This tale is a culmination of the themes of "The Heart of the Spring" and is an exorcism of Pater's aesthetic hero.

In "Rosa Alchemica" the two selves of earlier stories (the youth and the old man) are presented in the figures of Owen Ahearne and Michael Robartes. Ahearne is the Paterian recluse and aspiring alchemist who has written a book of "fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art" expressing the "cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences." In a style which does not emulate but rather outdoes Pater, Yeats characterizes and criticizes the essential aesthete. The characterizations are subtle caricatures and the plot should be read as an allegorical exorcism very similar to "The Seeker." Ahearne's Dublin house, like the abbey where the old man and the youth of "The

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[45]Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 112.

Heart of the Spring" lived, is the ancestral house of Irish history, legend, and myth: the Irish subject matter for a poetry of the dawn. The old man of the earlier story attempted in the gathering of a metaphorical landscape into his house of alchemical art to produce the miracle which Ahearne too has sought. Ahearne aspired to an "immortal ecstasy" through the dissolving of the mortal world and by living "amid immortal essences," but the heavens have not opened to him. His life represents the failure of an art which immures itself from life.

Ahearne, the narrator, has "mortgaged" his ancestral house, his inheritance, and the "house my ancestors had made famous" has been transformed into an aesthete's haven. He has removed "portraits of more historic than artistic interest" and has shut out "all history and activity untouched with beauty and peace." Allegorically, he is the artist of rootless cosmopolitanism. He is a gatherer of blossoms which other cultures have produced, and faces, in the stifling atmosphere of his house, their inevitable withering.

As an artist figure, Ahearne is a descendant of those poets whom Patrick transformed into herons. Like them, he is walled up in a subjective world and like them, ironically enough for a collector of art, he fears the confusion of Hodos Chameliontis. His state is a logical extension of the artist who belongs to the sunset phase. His search for a poetry of essences is characteristic of a late phase which he histrionically recognizes as having become "subtilized and complicated by the romantic movement in art and literature."[46] He served an age which had, he felt, begun "to tremble on the verge of some unimagined

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[46]Mythologies, p. 271.

revelation." The apocalypse which concludes the story is, in its melodrama, an ironical presentation and an exorcism of Axel's theme, and Mallarmé's trembling veil and savage gods.

Michael Robartes, the more adventurous mystic figure, visits Ahearne, declares him as a hopeless dreamer of the "crossways," and asks him to join the Order of the Alchemical Rose. The invitation is, in effect, to become a Magus. Robartes presents the alternatives:

> You have shut away the world and gathered the gods about you, and if you do not throw yourself at their feet, you will always be full of lassitude, and of wavering purpose, for a man must forget he is miserable in the bustle and noise of the multitude in this world and in time; or seek a mystical union with the multitude who govern this world and time.

Robartes has Yeats' aristocratic disdain for "the bustle and noise of the multitude," as Ahearne has Yeats' artistic fear of confusion and shapelessness. Robartes as a mystic adventurer threatens the composure of Ahearne's aestheticism of noncommitment: "You would sweep me away into an indefinite world which fills me with terror; and yet a man is a great man just in so far as he can make his mind reflect everything with indifferent precision like a mirror." The personality of Robartes breaks the mirror of Ahearne's character and introduces him to the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, in effect a Temple of Art. This Temple of Art, unlike Ahearne's house of aestheticism where art was an end in itself, practises in its rituals an Art of power and prophecy. It is recognizable as relating to that castle of heroes which Yeats was actively planning in 1896, and we know from passages in The Speckled Bird that the transforming zeal of "Oisin" associated itself now with an esoteric

society which would be prophet and priest of the new dispensation.[47] But in this story, which is an exorcism of this dream of a priesthood of art presiding over a national literary revival, the dream is deliberately vexed to nightmare. The temple is located on the west coast of Ireland. The landscape of art is, allegorically, similar to the abbey of "The Heart of the Spring," the ancient woods of silent brooding are now represented in the image of the "grey waves, plumed with scudding foam."

The deliberate histrionic tone of the anticipated apocalypse is again evidence of Yeats' intended exorcism of an influence. The sea seemed to Ahearne to be "part of some indefinite and passionate life, which had begun to war upon our orderly and careful days, and was about to plunge the world into a night as obscure as that which followed the downfall of the classical world." Yeats, like Ahearne, presents with imaginative belief the Zeitgeist of Mallarméan prophecy and at the same time recognizes the literary mannerism which he is intending to "write off." Ahearne reflects, "One part of my mind mocked this fantastic terror, but the other, the part that still lay half plunged in vision, listened to the clash of unknown armies, and shuddered at unimaginable fanaticisms, that hung in those grey leaping waves." The mocking half of Ahearne's mind is not simply an author's device to anticipate and forestall scepticism nor simply a disarming tactic to produce the

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[47] In the excerpt published by Hone, Michael Aherne (Yeats) seeks "to remake everything in a more ancient pattern" and to "make a little kingdom, a part of the great kingdom to come." The moment of renewal will be violent: Michael Aherne, full of plans, sees in the colours of the eastern sky "armed figures gathering to overthrow the present order of the world." The Bell (March 1941), p. 26.

imaginative belief of the story. It is also Yeats performing a ritualistic exorcism of the only theme of the sunset phase which had ever beguiled him, the theme of "Dover Beach." The literary inspiration figured in this temple is alien to the countryside and the peasant uprising exacts its retribution. We do recognize that on one level the characterization of the peasants as superstitious and truculent has its satiric element. Their uprising, on this level, is little more than journalist newspaper opinion and Catholic puritanism venting its fury on decadence. Similarly, the peasants' hatred and fear of the idolatrous temple proceeds from their religious belief which gives a validity to the atmosphere of imaginative belief necessary for the story and substantiates its blasphemous reality. Certainly the peasant figure of the old man, "evidently a watch man," whose duty was to watch over a place "where masons had lately been working upon a break in the pier," relates on the plane of social realism to the populace's concern to keep out the sea. However, the sea is symbolically the "...indefinite, passionate life, which had begun to war upon our orderly and careful days." These peasants are fishermen; their lives are also identified with the sea. Under the reign of Patrick they guard their orthodoxy by building sea walls. Yet they have ancient "divinities" whose "reign has never ceased but only waned in power a little." They "cannot build their temples again till there have been martyrdoms and victories and perhaps even that long-foretold battle in the Valley of the Black Pig." The story concludes with no such apocalyptic battle, but the peasant violence succeeds over the alien ritualism of the Temple. In the fifth and final section of the story, the light of the "chill dawn" shines upon

the sleeping society in the temple. Dawn, the tumult of the sea, and the angry cries of the fisherfolk become identified and their primitive vigour breaks down the doors of the Temple. Significantly, the peasants take the stones, which were to be used in building a pier, to hurl them at the society. Allegorically, these stones batter down both the Temple and their own pier of orthodox, orderly life. The fishermen, in other words, while still realistically and satirically presented as a bigoted and outraged orthodoxy have become more significant as the forces of a passionate dawn.

In the six stories of "Stories of Red Hanrahan" we have a similar thematic development. Hanrahan, in the first of these stories, pursues the phantom hounds of personal desire, but his footloose purposelessness is challenged by those ancestral, racial responsibilities which Ahearne had deliberately disregarded. Following the hounds, Hanrahan comes to "a very big shining house," and sees inside a sleeping queen "the most beautiful the world ever saw" attended by four aged women. The old women hold the symbols of cauldron, stone, spear, and sword. Hanrahan, challenged by the riddle, fails to question them, with the result that the queen must sleep on: "Echtge, daughter of the Silver Hand must stay in her sleep. It is a pity, it is a great pity." In the second story, "The Twisting of the Rope," Echtge appears to him in a vision and mocks his failure to awaken slumbering tradition: "...he was weak, he had no courage." Hanrahan becomes a poet haunted by this Irish muse, this daughter of the Sidhe, whom he has refused. In "Hanrahan's Curse," a farmer's daughter sees him as a man divided against himself. He has refused Echtge and the racial responsibility, curses the toil and the

dedication of one's life that she demands, and blesses the Paterian moment of beauty, the blossom, "Because it comes in beauty, and in beauty blows away." The story "Hanrahan's Vision" presents a synoptic review of the aesthetic themes of "The Heart of the Spring" and restates the debate between self and soul, youth and age, in explicit reference to Yeats' vocation as a poet. Hanrahan, like the boy in "The Heart of Spring" fears enthrallment by the Sidhe; like Peer Gynt he is a wanderer whose refusal to commit himself to racial tradition threatens to result in a shapeless incoherent art; like Ahearne he would celebrate only the rootless art of aestheticism's blossoms. He comes to realize that those who celebrate only the blossom of youth, the life of sensations, will never achieve an eternal art. In his vision, he views a procession of phantoms which repeats, allegorically, the argument of the three ages of the imagination. The first figures serve the racial life, a community of belief, wherein they find unity of being. The second group are pairs of lovers, those who have betrayed the racial life and have sought sufficient meaning in personal love. Devorgilla, the explicator of the phantom procession, belongs to this group. She is the infamous, legendary example of the selfish love of man and woman: "it was but the blossom of the man and of the woman we loved in one another." In the legend, their personal passion brought about the social disruption which invited the Norman Conquests, an event which superimposed an alien character upon the imaginative life of Ireland. Other lovers follow in the procession. These have mirrors for hearts and are the introspective worshippers of their own images mirrored in the hearts of their partners. Last of all come the single file of solipsists whose art is condemned

to lonely soliloquy. Hanrahan recognizes his own failure to serve the queen of racial life, a failure imaged in the selfish love of Devorgilla and her betrayal of her people. He too has been a worshipper of blossoms and he stands condemned. "A great terror" falls upon Hanrahan.

The concluding story, "The Death of Hanrahan", is set at the foot of Slieve Echtage, in the cabin of an old woman, Winnie Byrne, who is crazed with age and sorrow, but in whose imagination flowers the youth of the racial consciousness. She sings, "I am beautiful...I am young...." Also in the cabin are the four old women of the first story, the sybils of ancient Celtic wisdom. Hanrahan, now a Knight of the Grail of wisdom, asks the question. In the delirium of his deathbed, Winnie, "one of the lasting people," becomes transformed into a youthful girl, and the ritual lights of wake and marriage commingle. Unlike the old man in "The Heart of the Spring," Hanrahan has at last found the enduring blossom in an art which celebrates the race's ageless wisdom.

Our interpretation of "Oisin" as a poem committed to the racial life clarifies the allegory in the stories written in 1890's on the theme of a divided allegiance between a new aestheticism of the English sunset phase and the inspiration of an Irish mythological dawn. It is most revealing to read the manuscript versions of <u>The Shadowy Waters</u> in the light of this recurrent theme.

Recent criticism by Bloom, Sidnell, and Clark has begun to explore the manuscript revisions of this play which was begun as early as 1883. Yeats stopped work on it sometime before beginning "Oisin," returned to it in 1894, and then revised it several times before having it published

after the turn of the century. Professor Sidnell has published an "abbreviated description and chronology" of extant manuscript versions. His publication does not intend an interpretation of themes or symbols but simply notes wherein successive drafts differ. Professor Clark has considered to some extent the occult significance of the play's symbolism, but his presentation is, in the main, descriptive and not interpretive. On the other hand, Professor Bloom interprets the successive drafts of the play as an evolving major work whose hero, Forgael, is an "antithetical questor" in the tradition of Shelley and Byron.

Before beginning an explication of the play's significance for Yeats, it is necessary to go back to the first major work of Yeats published after "Oisin," the play The Countess Cathleen. This play Yeats has called a "counter-truth" to "Oisin,"[48] and this generalized description has been interpreted much as he probably intended it should be, as his early counter-statement of a Christian theme following the pagan legend of "Oisin." Yeats has also implied that this play was the second work of a projected "légende des siècles," and that the veiled political significances of the play were a counter-truth to "Oisin's" flight into fairyland." We propose that the "counter-truth" of the play is only properly understood if we compare the significance of Oisin as a poet-hero of racial commitment with Kevin (Aleel in later revisions), the poet-figure in the play. Kevin pleads the cause of the personal, subjective, private life, as against the public commitment of his beloved Cathleen. The autobiographical nature of this change in Yeats' persona

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[48] In his late poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion."

is important. Maud Gonne, whom he met in 1889 just after the publication of "Oisin," would have been, for an "Irish Victor Hugo," a promising collaborator in a public nationalist and literary cause, but for the fact that the poet fell in love with her. Her ardent nationalism was soon felt to be a rival to his love, and the public cause she "served" was, ironically enough, a cause for jealousy. The intensity of Yeats' passion for her, together with his new aesthetic idealism and his growing bitter experience with the uncomely shapelessness of the popular literary movement, resulted in a new assertion of personal, aesthetic values as a counter truth to those of a public, sometimes simply political nature.

The dissenting voice of Kevin-Aleel, necessarily subordinated in the public theme of the play, is heard in the articles, reviews and stories we have been discussing. The pleading lover becomes, in Forgael, the dominant Magus figure who commands the love of Dectora and kills her poet-lover Aleel. Forgael's disdain for the world of sublunary nature and his transcendental voyaging is the continuing counter-assertion of the self over the public cause of the race. The roses, lilies and other blossoms of a new aestheticism gained further attractiveness as they became associated with the equally ideal beauty of Maud Gonne. In the never completed autobiography, The Speckled Bird, which was being written while Yeats was re-working The Shadowy Waters, the despairing passion is painfully recorded. Margaret, who is Maud in this projected biography, observes to Michael Ahearne:

> You said just now that the lilies were accusing the world, and I can see that Maclagan's ideas are already taking away your peace. You cannot be happy or quietly friendly. You are

> in a fever of hatred of things that you can never change...[49]

Maclagan (Macgregor Mathers) is a Magus of occult wisdom, an associate of Yeats in The Order of the Golden Dawn. This brief passage reviews the three powerful influences which motivated Forgael's antithetical quest. Forgael, as an antithetical questor, is the counter-truth to Oisin. In another passage from The Speckled Bird, Michael Ahearne (Yeats) wonders,

> Why, too, was it that she could not understand his ideas any longer? Was not her beauty an arraignment of all these people and all these things? Did it not cry out to have them remade in beauty? He had never really understood the ugliness of the world until he had seen her and now she sided with the world against him.[50]

The frustrated love for Maud Gonne is evident in the revised roles of Dectora and Forgael in the play. Forgael, in an early revision, scorns her mundane commitment and rejects her. In a later version he kills her and then commits suicide. The first published revision has the two sailing away to a transcendental union.

The most obvious, and we shall argue the most significant, alterations which Yeats made in his revisions have not been analyzed by critics. These are the evolution of the Fomors or Seabars from the vague spirits of the 1884 version to the eagle-headed creatures who have such an assertive presence in the manuscript of 1894-1895. These Fomorian monsters are replaced in the published version by sailors, a dissenting and equally threatening, but a more human company, for Forgael.

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[49] Hone, "A Brief Excerpt...," p. 25.

[50] Ibid., p. 25.

Professor Clark has suggested that by "fusing them with the sailors"[51] Yeats may well have simply followed George Moore's practical advice about the dramatically intractable nature of this eagle-headed race. Clark discusses in some detail their mythological significance as gods of darkness who war against the children of the light, and quite rightly it would seem, associates the Irish mythology of warring opposites with a similar antithesis central to Rosicrucian philosophy.

Professor Bloom looks to Yeats' literary inheritance for his evaluation of these creatures. He reads them as mythopoeic "...directly derived from Shelley and Blake and the story of 'antithetical' quest Yeats had made up for himself in his creative swerve from their influences."[52] Again, "Like Manfred, he [Forgael] has traffic with the dark powers, here the Fomorah or Seabars, eagle-headed creatures, and again like Manfred, he dominates the gods of darkness by his mysterious connection with the gods of light."[53] The Fomors belong, like Alastor, to those furies or avenging spirits who pursue the antithetical questor of an inhuman ideal.

In this richly symbolic and explorative play, both Bloom's interpretation of a necessary mythopoeic significance and Clark's suggestion of the deliberate mythological and occult symbolism are relevant. But neither exegesis considers the relevance of certain facts of the plot, facts which suggest most persuasively the very personal and contemporary relevance of the Fomorian presences. In the 1884 manuscript, the

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[51]Clark, p. 156.

[52]Bloom, p. 137.

[53]Bloom, p. 134. My brackets.

attendant spirits, later to become the Fomors, are described as the "Children of Aoifa." They appear to be quite simply agents of the unnamed hero, a "master,"[54] who is a Magus figure common enough in Yeats' other verse of this early period. In the 1894 manuscript, these spirits, now called the Fomor, are related to the hero Forgael in a more complex way. The Fomor plan to kill Forgael because he had sworn, in return for certain powers, to be their deliverer and to wage war against the presently ascendent Danaan race. "Forgael has not kept his bargain with the Fomor; instead in a trance induced by apple-blossoms he rejects the world and wishes for divine passions."[55] Apple-blossom is undoubtedly the symbol for Maud Gonne: the essential "counter-truth" of The Countess Cathleen is to be understood in this detail of the plot. The Fomor, whose cause Forgael once championed, are now to be shunned in favour of the Danaan race, the children of light. So shunned, their character becomes more threatening and more monstrous. Yeats, after publishing "Oisin," was, for various reasons already considered, much more critical of his earlier identification of his poet's role as emancipator of the racial imagination. He had aesthetic reservations about throwing his poetic powers into that recurring battle with Oisin's demon. But by withdrawing from his simple identification of self and race, the old problem of the romantic subjective, the threatened state of solipsism or confusion, welled up again. The manuscript versions of 1894 abound in imagery of mocking self-reflection: mirrors and reflecting shields, throw back upon Forgael his own essential loneliness. Even the voice of

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[54]Sidnell, p. 40.

[55]Sidnell's description is quoted. p. 42.

Dectora, when she comes to love Forgael, is interpreted as the hallucination of his own love-hungry heart.[56] Writing later of this state Yeats remembered,

> My isolation from ordinary men and women was increased by an asceticism of mind and body, combined with an adoration of physical beauty that made it meaningless. Sometimes the barrier between myself and other people filled me with terror; an unfinished poem, and the first and never-finished version of The Shadowy Waters had this terror for their theme.[57]

This personal sense of terror cannot be adequately explained if we look upon the Fomor as simply symbolic of the powers of darkness which Yeats experienced vicariously in Rosicrucian or occult texts. That they had this cosmological significance in Theosophy he was well aware. We can look back to his article of 1889, "Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches, etc.," published in Madame Blavatsky's theosophical magazine Lucifer for evidence of this. But, more significantly, in the same article there are suggestions of other, more personal interpretations of the conflict between the gods of the light and the powers of darkness. In the article, Yeats makes his Irish mythological contributions to the universal science of theosophy and establishes parallels that are revealing: "Once upon a time the Celtic nations worshipped the gods of the light, called in Ireland Tuatha-de-Danan and corresponding to Jupiter and his fellows, and gods of the great darkness corresponding to

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[56] Forgael declares to Dectora:

> Away from me away from me. You too.
> You too. Your eyes are but
> My eyes, your voice is but my voice. Clark, p. 176.

[57] Letters to the New Island, p. xii.

the Saturnian Titans."[58] We can recall the Titan significance we have argued lies behind "Oisin." Shelley's Prometheus, Keats' Hyperion, and Arnold's appreciation of the "essential" Celtic character as being passionately beyond the Olympian "despotism of fact" were the spiritual fathers of "Oisin." And Oisin challenged the Jupiter figure of Patrick and all his "fellows," academic and otherwise. In this same article, Yeats describes the continuance of the Saturnian power in contemporary folk-lore. In the Pookha of folk-lore "hangs the dark vapour of Domnian Titanism." Yeats had read Rhys' Celtic Heatherdom, and Rhys associated the Domnian spirits with the Firbolgs. Forgael was a Firbolg King whom the Fomors had enlisted to their service in war against the Danaans. From O'Grady's history Yeats had read of the legend of the last King of the Firbolgs "whose tomb or temple may be seen today at Ballysadare, County Sligo, on the edge of the sea."[59] Book Three of "Oisin" was composed at Sligo and the sleeping Titans of that book are a feathered race who await their time of awakening. The powers of darkness, for the Yeats of 1889, had an exciting, "fabulous" character. The poet's solitary nature found companionship in other "outcast" spirits and these included Titans who had been thrust out from their proper inheritance by the Olympians of present reign. It is significant that the author's pseudonym for John Sherman and Dhoya was Ganconagh, one of the "solitary" spirits of surviving Irish folk-lore.

The significance of the Fomor is very similar to that of the demon which Oisin had heroically battled. The dual nature of the demon is

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[58] "Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches, etc.," Lucifer (Jan. 15, 1889).

[59] O'Grady, History of Ireland, II, 64.

characteristic of these creatures, for they are both projections of aspects of the poet's own character (the Fomor, indeed, in this aspect are the fearful imaginings of the solipsist Forgael) and they also represent objective realities. Oisin battled the demon of an alien literary and political rule. Forgael, in retreat from public life, would sail across the sea away from the Ireland to which Oisin had returned. The Fomor, then, are both threatening Hodos Chameliontis for a Forgael who seeks the light of wisdom, and also the threatening demon of public involvement and strife. The new demons, of course, are not simply the old antagonists like Dowden and others, but rather are Yeats' nationalist associates with whom he, like Forgael, had sworn a dedication to a cause.

Professor Bloom's appreciation of the sheer savagery of the Fomor and Forgael's association with them misses their immediate significance for Yeats. Bloom observes,

> The Fomorah are cannibals...bordering at times on the splendidly repulsive. Perhaps George Moore, who took credit for persuading Yeats to rid the poem of the Fomorah, was moved by considerations of human tact as well as stage-craft. The Fomorah are bitter, dispossessed undersea creatures, now deformed into predatory bird-like beasts. Forgael feeds the victims of his piracy to them, not out of sadism or rancour, but out of a precisely apocalyptic indifference to the mere given world, natural and human.[60]

He fails to appreciate the significance of the facts that Forgael was, earlier, a deliverer of the Fomor, that he is implicated to some extent in their savagery, and that they do indeed have cause to resent his betrayal of their cause and his new allegiance to the Danaans.

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[60]Bloom, p. 134.

Sidnell's summary of the "plot" in manuscripts dated 1896-1897 is useful. The Fomor lose their "master" when, under his direction, they steal "roses from the island of the Danaans." "These roses, when gathered about the heart, will induce wisdom in successive lives until creation is extinguished."[61] Roses alternate with apple-blossoms in the revisions as the flower of immortal desire. The roses of The Secret Rose, which were symbols of both aestheticism and Rosicrucian wisdom, are to be equated with these Danaan blossoms. The whole extended allegory of a divided allegiance which we have reviewed in the allegory of the stories of the 1890's has its counterpart in the Fomor-Danaan strife of The Shadowy Waters.

The predatory nature of the Fomor can be understood as reflecting Yeats' own earlier bitter, sometimes savage, involvement in public controversy. Allied originally with the Fomor to fight "the invaders from the sea," Forgael, like Yeats in his literary battles, had thrown metaphorical corpses to feed the insatiable appetite of a nationalist press. The original mythological significance of the Fomor as misshapen Titans (the uncomely transformation imaging the disillusionment of an earlier idealism) receded in time and Yeats could finally allow himself to replace these hitherto obsessive images of betrayal and ugliness with the more realistic sailors. The sailors, however, retain the character of a predatory journalism. They are mutinous, resentful of their "master," who has grown distasteful of a pirate's role and who would lead them into a world they cannot understand. They are concerned,

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[61] Sidnell, p. 46.

characteristically enough, with the immediate booty of practical, essentially political literature.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that much of Yeats' early verse and prose had aesthetic values for its subject and his sense of a literary inheritance as its theme. In agreeing with Arnold's assessment of the debilitating subjectivism of contemporary literature, with what Yeats called the "sad soliloquies" of late romantic poetry, the young poet became a critical allegorist. We have shown how deliberately the verse plays and poetry of the 1880's moved allegorically through landscapes of art, ambitiously seeking bardic, heroic expression for Irish myth and legend. Oisin was his first major expression of the homeric, racial hero, a protagonist who combatted the alien culture of the late English phase and an intended spokesman for the epic sensibility belonging to the earlier Irish phase. The two eternities, that of soul and that of race, were competing inspirations for Yeats in the 1890's. The extended debate evident in the stories discussed had its resolution in the exorcism of "Rosa Alchemica" where there is the attempted dispatch of both aesthetic and racial hero through the depiction of the aesthete's temple pillaged by the rabble.

The quest for a discipline to harness the vast tumultuous world of Irish mythology became involved with the occultism of The Golden Dawn. The "passionate dawn" of epic sensibility became associated in Yeats' mind with an apocalyptic sense of the late European phase of imaginative life which was hurrying towards its extinction: the age was about to

reverse itself. Through this dramatic association, the dualism of the sunset and the dawn was hopefully to be resolved. The "golden dawn" of occult wisdom aspired to become the alchemical resolution of otherwise divergent inspirations.

The progeny of this alchemical transmutation where life becomes art, and yet sings of life, of what is past or passing or to come, is the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium." The progeny of the sleeping Titans of "Oisin's" third book are the rough beasts of violent renewal. Behind both, and the single parent of each, is the romantic trumpet of Hugo's Hernani. In 1890, Yeats associated the aestheticism of his Pre-Raphaelite inspiration with the aggressively public declamation of Hugo's art:

> The movement most characteristic of literature and art...of our century has been romanticism. We all know the old formal classicism gave battle to it and was defeated when Hernani's horn rang out on the French stage. That horn has been ringing through the world ever since...It marked the regained freedom of the spirit and imagination of man in literature.

It is this trumpet which heralded Yeats' expectations as a romantic poet; it is the "King's great horn" in Yeats' last poem, "The Black Tower," a horn never sounded, which concludes the poet's career. In between lies the achievement of this "last romantic."

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